IRAN'S QODS FORCE

Proxy Wars, Terrorism, and the War on America

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I dedicate this book to Charles Boyd and Rex Taylor, two teachers who encouraged my interest in the world around me.

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Acronyms

A2/AD	anti-access/area-denial
AAH	Asaib Ahl al-Haq (Iraq)
AMIA	Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina
AQI	Al-Qaeda in Iraq
ARAMCO	Saudi Arabian Oil Company (formerly Arab-American Oil Company)
ASCM	antiship cruise missile
ATGM	antitank guided missile
BBC	British Broadcasting Company
CENTCOM	Central Command (U.S.)
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency (U.S.)
COIN	counterinsurgency
CT	counterterrorism
DEA	Drug Enforcement Administration (U.S.)
DoD	Department of Defense (U.S.)
EFP	explosively formed penetrator
EIJ	Egyptian Islamic Jihad
F3EA	Find, Fix, Finish, Exploit, and Analyze
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation (U.S.)

FID	foreign internal defense
FOB	forward operating base
GPO	Government Publishing [until 2014, Printing] Office (U.S.)
HAMAS	Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya (Islamic Resistance Movement)
IAF	Israeli air force
IDF	Israel Defense Forces
IED	improvised explosive device
IFLB	Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain
IJO	Islamic Jihad Organization
INIS	Iraqi National Intelligence Service
IRAM	improvised rocket-assisted mortar
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps
IRGCID	Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Intelligence Directorate
IRGC-QF	Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps–Qods Force
IRIB	Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
ISCI	Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq
ISI	Inter-Services Intelligence (Pakistan)
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
JAM	Jaish al-Mahdi (Iraq)
JSOC	Joint Special Operations Command (U.S.)
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
KDPI	Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government (Iraq)
LAF	Lebanese Armed Forces

MANPADS	man-portable air-defense system
MEK	Mojahedin-e Khalq (People's Holy Warriors)
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Iran)
MOIS	Ministry of Intelligence and Security (Iran) (also VEVAK)
NDF	National Defense Force (Syria)
NIF	National Islamic Front (Sudan)
NSC	National Security Council (US)
OMS	Office of the Martyr Sadr (Iraq)
OPEC	Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries
OSD	Office of the Secretary of Defense (U.S.)
PA	Palestinian Authority
PFLP-GC	Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine–General Command
PIJ	Palestine Islamic Jihad
PJAK	Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê (Kurdistan Free Life Party) (Iran)
PJCC	Provincial Joint Construction Center
PKK	Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (Kurdistan Workers' Party)
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organization
PMF	Popular Mobilization Forces (Iraq)
POW	prisoner of war
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
RPG	rocket-propelled grenade
SAC	Special Action Committee (Iran)
SAM	surface-to-air missile
SAVAK	Sazman-e Ettelat va Amniyat-e Keshvar (National

	Organization for Security and Intelligence) (Iran)
SAVAMA	Sazman-e Ettelat va Amniyat-e Meli (Organization for Security and Intelligence of the People of Iran)
SBS	Special Boat Squadron (U.K.)
SCIRI	Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (also ISCI)
SCNS	Supreme Council for National Security (Iran)
SEAL	Sea, Air, and Land (U.S.)
SIDE	Secretaría de Inteligencia del Estado (Argentine)
SIGINT	signals intelligence
SSM	surface-to-surface missile
TF	Task Force (followed by number)
TIR	Tactical Interrogation Report
VEVAK	Vezarat-e Ettelat va Amniyat-e Keshvar (Ministry of Intelligence and Security) (Iran)
VIN	vehicle identification number

Introduction

A Martyr's Death

Qassem Soleimani died pretty much the way he predicted he would. He also died the way he *wanted* to die: as a "martyr," for Islam, Iran, and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader. In fact, Soleimani had always been fatalistic when it came to his personal security. He shunned bulletproof vests and helmets, even when he toured dangerous battle fronts in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. He must have known that his movements were being tracked, because, over the course of his long career as Iran's top covert-action warrior, Qassem Soleimani had made many enemies. Many of them wanted to see him dead.

A MARTYR'S DEATH

At least two of those enemies, the United States and Israel, tracked Soleimani when they could. On 2 January 2020, he was in Beirut for talks with an old friend, Hassan Nasrallah, the secretary general of Hezbollah, when the Israelis picked up Soleimani's elusive trail. After several hours of talks, Soleimani returned to Damascus by car and boarded a Syrian Cham Wings A-320 for a routine flight to Baghdad. Delayed by two hours for unknown reasons, the aircraft eventually left Damascus at 2218 local time.[1]

As Soleimani's airliner proceeded to Baghdad, the Israelis passed the baton to their American counterparts, who had their own interest in eliminating him. In fact, Qassem Soleimani had been taunting the "Great Satan" for years. He had especially enjoyed brandishing a slogan that his hero, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, had used during the "hostage crisis" of 1979–81: "America can't do a damn thing." Years after the hostages were released, Iran was still trying to expel the United States from the Middle

East through terrorism and proxy wars. In fact, by 2020 Soleimani's Qods Force had killed more than a thousand Americans in a bloody swath that extended from Lebanon to Afghanistan.[2]

A U.S. MQ-9 Reaper drone was on station when Soleimani's plane touched down at Baghdad International Airport shortly after midnight on 3 January 2020. The Reaper used its infrared and optical sensors to track Soleimani's plane taxiing to a special apron where it halted and began to shut down its engines. The Reaper "pilot," thousands of miles away in the United States, watched as the Qods Force commander and his entourage exited the plane and approached a convoy of cars parked a short distance away. Soleimani entered a Toyota Avalon, while his bodyguards piled into a nearby SUV. As the convoy departed the airport via an access road, the Reaper pilot obtained the final clearances necessary to destroy the vehicles. Three Hellfire guided missiles struck and incinerated them. Ten people were killed in the attack, including the number-one target.[3]

The many ironies of Qassem Soleimani's life were enshrined in his death. He died in the capital city of a country that he had fought against for eight long years in the 1980s. He died in a country whose government he had fought to preserve for six more years, from 2014 to 2020. He had repeatedly defied the United States and other enemies to "do their worst." In the end, that is exactly what they did.

At Soleimani's side in death was an Iraqi comrade named Jamal Jafar Ibrahim. Better known by his nom de guerre "Abu Mahdi al-Mohandis," this man had fought for Iran's Revolutionary Guards against his own country during the 1980–88 Iran-Iraq War. The United States wanted him for a string of terrorist attacks against American citizens and property that extended over a period of nearly forty years. At the time of his death, al-Mohandis led one of the most lethal Shia militias in Iraq.[4]

The news of Soleimani's death generated conflicting reactions. Some Iraqis openly celebrated the death of the "tyrant," while others mourned. In Iran, Ayatollah Khamenei called for three days of mourning and warned that Soleimani's "departure to God does not end his path or his mission, but a forceful revenge awaits the criminals who have his blood … on their hands."[5] The Pentagon sought to justify Soleimani's death on the basis of his track record and alleged plans to inflict more harm on U.S. interests: "General Suleimani [*sic*] was actively developing plans to attack American

diplomats and service members in Iraq and throughout the region. … General Suleimani and his Quds [a variant transliteration of Qods] Force were responsible for the deaths of hundreds of American and coalition service members and the wounding of thousands more."[6]

As Khamenei decreed, Qassem Soleimani's corpse was flown to several cities around Iran, including Ahvaz, Mashhad, Tehran, Qom, and his hometown of Kerman. Thousands of Iranians, conditioned over the years to view Soleimani as a national hero, joined mass protests against the United States. For some, his death was a rallying point for a beleaguered nation, but others regarded it as yet another symbol of Iran's political sclerosis that valued foreign wars over internal development. Still, if we take a longer view, the eulogies and praise heaped on Soleimani were somewhat surprising for a man who never completed elementary school.[7]

THE QODS FORCE

This book is about the organization that Qassem Soleimani led for the last twenty-two years of his life. Its formal name in the American, British, and Israeli intelligence communities is the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps–Qods Force (IRGC-QF), although it is now known simply as the "Qods Force."[8] This book details how Soleimani presided over the Qods Force's rise from an obscure, secretive covert-action arm of the Revolutionary Guards to one of the most powerful institutions in Iran today.

Soleimani's fame and notoriety aside, the Qods Force is a creature of its times and the state that created it. That state, the Islamic Republic of Iran, is a theocracy born out of a revolution that occurred more than forty years ago. Like other revolutionary states, Islamic Iran tried to export its revolution, much to the consternation of its neighbors. What Ayatollah Khomeini regarded as the "liberation of the oppressed" Iran's neighbors saw as "terrorism" or the imposition of Iranian hegemony. This book shows that the Qods Force is indispensable to Iran's ambitions of regional hegemony. Indeed, we cannot understand Iranian foreign policy without examining how secretive institutions like the Qods Force *shape* that policy.

COVERT ACTION

This book also explains how Iran's unelected leaders wage war against the United States. It is not a conventional war as we understand it, with tanks, fighter jets, and submarines: Iran is under no illusions that it can win a war against the United States on that plane in that arena. Instead, Iran fights in the shadows, where nonattribution is the currency of a lethal game for power in and mastery over the Middle East.

The U.S. National Security Act of 1947 defined covert action as "an activity or activities … to influence political, economic, or military conditions abroad, where it is intended that the role of the [initiating party] will not be apparent or acknowledged publicly."[9] This definition applies to the kinds of covert action conducted by the Islamic Republic of Iran. To paraphrase Carl von Clausewitz, covert action "is a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means."[10] Such "means" include psychological operations, where information is used to convince an adversary (or neutral party) to believe and do something beneficial to the covert actor's interests. Covert action also includes support for dissident groups; assassinations to destabilize, thwart, or otherwise alter another party's policies; and proxy wars by which a state employs nonstate actors to achieve national goals without getting the state's hands dirty. On occasion, as the United States itself demonstrated in 1953 when the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) ousted Iranian premier Mohammed Mossadeq, covert action entails the removal of a regime itself rather than the changing of specific policies.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has employed covert action against the United States and its allies since 1979. The following gives us a rough idea of what Iranian covert action looks like, as well as of its lethal consequences:

- Suicide bombings of American embassy in Beirut (1983–84): 88 dead
- Suicide bombing of U.S. Marine Corps barracks in Beirut (1983): 241 dead
- Suicide bombing of French paratrooper barracks in Beirut (1983): 58 dead
- Suicide bombing of Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires (1992): 29 dead

- Suicide bombing of Jewish cultural center in Buenos Aires (1994): 85 dead
- Bombing of U.S. Air Force barracks in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia (1996): 19 dead
- Use of explosive formed penetrators (EFPs) against American and allied forces in Iraq (2005–11): 609 killed

THE U.S. RESPONSE

This book shows how the U.S. government has often confronted Iran with both hands tied behind its back. Indeed, it is a disturbing pattern in American interactions with Iran that American decision makers seem oblivious to the dimension and nature of the threat confronting them. According to *New York Times* journalist Ronen Bergman, "The problem is that after three decades of trying to meet the Iranian challenge with a variety of strategies … *we still do not understand Iran*. We do not know what its leaders want to do, and we do not know how to stop them from doing it."[11]

Melissa Dalton of the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC, calls the Iranian "brand" of covert warfare "threshold avoidance": "Supporting sub-state proxy groups such as Hezbollah … allows Iran to pursue its goals of increased influence in the Middle East, while avoiding kinetic consequences. Iran enjoys a significant measure of plausible deniability with this pillar of its strategic approach."[12]

"Threshold avoidance" and "plausible deniability" have been successful strategies for Iran: in each of the examples cited above, the United States *did not retaliate directly against Iran*. As this book reveals, American officials debated the possibility on numerous occasions but each time stepped back from executing a kinetic response—until, that is, Soleimani's 2020 assassination. At the time of writing it remains to be seen if Washington has rewritten the "rules" of covert action in its confrontation with Iran and, if so, whether Tehran intends to observe them.

BOOK STRUCTURE

This book is arranged in chronological order, although individual chapters deal with specific themes, such as covert action in Iranian strategy or the tactical use of the Qods Force in wartime. The first part provides the context for the Qods Force's creation in 1990, analyzing the life of its best-known commander, Qassem Soleimani, and his career as an Islamic Revolutionary Guard. It also examines the Qods Force's early years, when it competed with other powerful players for a share of Iran's covert operations in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Afghanistan. The second part explores the Qods Force's controversial ties with al-Qaeda, its adjustment to the post-9/11 regional security environment, and its implementation of Iranian policy in Afghanistan. Part III is set aside for Iraq: its multifaceted importance for Iran, the impact of the 2003 U.S. occupation of Iraq on Iranian threat perceptions, and how Iran fought the United States by proxy in Iraq from 2004 to 2011. Over time, the United States responded to Iranian covert action in Iraq by using special operations forces against Iranian officers and proxies; however, Iran was playing a longer game, and when the United States withdrew its military forces in 2011 Tehran seemed to be the biggest beneficiary. The fourth part is set aside for Iranian policy toward the Gulf Arab states and Yemen. The Qods Force has nurtured a number of proxies against Saudi Arabia and its allies while at the same time expanding Iranian influence in Yemen via the Houthi militia. Part V explores how Tehran has used the Qods Force to fulfill Iranian goals and policies in the Levant region, where Iran has nurtured a powerful proxy, Hezbollah, while at the same time expanding its war by proxy against Israel. The sixth and final part traces how the Qods Force commander, Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani, achieved his apotheosis in Iraq after Islamic State terrorists threatened that country's stability and survival in 2014 and 2015. A conclusion ties the various strands of the narrative together and offers some general ideas about the roles that covert action and unconventional warfare have played in the formulation and implementation of Iranian foreign policy.

Perhaps it is fitting that Qassem Soleimani, the master practitioner of covert action, be given the final word: "Sometimes we solve issues through diplomacy, which is good. But some problems cannot be solved through

diplomatic means."[13] This book is about some of those latter "problems." It is about the Qods Force: Iran's preferred instrument for dealing with problems that defy conventional solutions.

PART I

Origins and Early Activities

1

The Iranian Revolution's Everyman

At five feet, four inches, Qassem Soleimani didn't exactly have a commanding presence—at least not at first glance. Yet by the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century, his stature had assumed near-mythological proportions in Iran and even abroad. He had been described as a Persian version of "Karla," the infamous spymaster of John Le Carré's novels, and also as "evil incarnate," in the words of Gen. David Petraeus.[1] A Canadian foreign minister considered Soleimani to be "a terrorist agent in the region disguised as a hero," while a Russian journal insisted he was the "most powerful figure in the Middle East."[2]

SUPERMANI

Iranians tended to be effusive about him. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei famously called him "a living martyr of the revolution" in 2005, while a 2018 poll revealed that 65 percent of Iranians viewed Soleimani in a "very favorable" way.[3] In cyberspace he was called "Supermani." Indeed, Soleimani's legend was enhanced by his own Instagram and Twitter accounts, where he posted news of his latest exploits in Iraq and Syria.[4]

The odd thing about the adulation and notoriety surrounding Qassem Soleimani is that it all came relatively late in his life. In 2000, for example, when Soleimani had been commander of the Qods Force for a little more than two years, he was still a somewhat mysterious figure to U.S. intelligence agencies. At the time, American intelligence analysts possessed only a grainy image of the man captured from Iranian state television; the

joke at the time was that Soleimani bore a slight resemblance to the American actor George Clooney.

The extent to which Soleimani's life mirrored that of many Iranians his age is striking. He grew up under the last shah of Iran, participated in the 1979 revolution that ushered in the Islamic Republic, fought in Iran's eight-year attrition war with Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and mourned the 1989 death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Qassem Soleimani also witnessed the birth of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and its rise from ragtag militia to arguably Iran's most powerful institution by the time of his death in 2020.

Like many pious Muslims, including the Prophet Mohammed, whose manners and habits he tried to emulate, Soleimani projected an image of outward modesty. This held even in the face of attempts by others to make him a national hero in the years immediately preceding his death. In 2016 there were rumors he was considering a run for president of his country (rumors he ultimately scotched). Still, when we explore his humble beginnings it is hard to imagine how Soleimani reached the heights that he did.

EARLY LIFE

Qassem Soleimani was born on 11 March 1957 in an impoverished mountain village called Qanat-e Malek. Like most rural settlements in Iran at the time, Qanat-e Malek lacked electricity, plumbing, and all the other amenities by which we now characterize "modern living." The closest town, Rabor, had a population of around 11,000, but it could only be reached by a dusty, potholed track.[5]

It was a hard existence. Rain is scarce in most of Iran—the national average was 8.7 inches a year throughout most of the twentieth century. It is even scarcer in Kerman Province, where Qanat-e Malek is located, which averages 6 inches per year.[6] Fresh water is a precious resource in Iran. In many parts of rural Iran ingenious, centuries-old networks of underground tunnels called *qanats* channel rain and snowmelt from the surrounding mountains to farmers' fields. Qanats still constitute the linchpin of Kerman's agricultural economy. In fact, the name of Soleimani's village,

Qanat-e Malek, can be translated as “Canal of the King,” testimony to the important role that these underground channels play in village life.

Qassem’s father, Hassan Soleimani, was born in 1920, and like millions of other peasants he was supposed to benefit from Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi’s ambitious rural land-reform scheme, the “White Revolution.” As has been true in land-reform campaigns in other countries, there were significant gaps between the plans as were envisaged in the national capital and their actual implementation in rural areas. Indeed, many poor farmers like Hassan Soleimani were saddled with debts they couldn’t afford. A consequence was a rural exodus to the cities in the 1960s and 1970s, laying what would be one of the crucial planks for the 1979 revolution.[7]

Qassem Soleimani was part of that exodus. In 1970, at the age of thirteen, he went to Kerman City with his cousin, Ahmed, to look for work and help pay down some of his father’s debts. Kerman must have been the proverbial “bright lights, big city” for these two teenagers from Iran’s backcountry. According to the 1966 national census, the population of the provincial capital stood at around 85,000, a number that would have ranked it among the largest Iranian cities at the time.[8]

Qassem and Ahmed Soleimani encountered problems familiar to those of unskilled rural laborers everywhere: scarce jobs and low wages. As Qassem himself put it later when he was famous and free from want, “We were only thirteen, and our bodies were so tiny, wherever we went they wouldn’t hire us … [u]ntil one day, when we were hired as laborers at a school construction site on Khajoo Street, which was where the city ended. They paid us two Tomans per day.”[9] Two tomans would have been roughly equivalent to about $0.25 at the time. It was a pittance by anyone’s standards, both then and now.[10]

When Soleimani migrated to Kerman City, Iran was on the cusp of a tremendous surge in industrialization and urbanization. To a great extent it was spurred by a dramatic increase in world oil prices brought about by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), a producer cartel, and by Middle East wars. In fact, with the dramatic infusion of “petrodollars” into Iran’s coffers after the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, municipalities like Kerman received an infusion of capital investment in local infrastructure. In this apparent bonanza of riches even marginal rural

laborers like Qassem and Ahmed Soleimani were bound to benefit at some point.[11]

But there are limits to economic growth, especially when it is generated by surging commodities prices. By the mid-1970s Iran's economy was overheating, hampered by infrastructure bottlenecks, spiraling inflation, and growing income disparities. Some Iranians were clearly doing very well and had ample resources to tide them over economic setbacks, but most, like Soleimani, were living on the margins and vulnerable to economic downturns. By 1975, Qassem was drifting from job to job. As was true of millions of other Iranians, his greatest challenges were lack of education, technical skills, and the all-important political and social connections enjoyed by the elites. Despite these obstacles, Qassem managed to send home part of his small income to help pay his father's debts. He even managed to obtain a job with the Kerman City Water Authority. But it must have seemed as if all doors for advancement were permanently closed.[12]

When he wasn't on the streets looking for work, Qassem Soleimani attended a local *zurkhaneh*, a "house of strength." The zurkhaneh, a uniquely Iranian cultural institution that combines wrestling and calisthenics with religious rituals, played an important role in the street politics of twentieth-century Iran. It was in the zurkhanehs of south Tehran, for example, that the CIA and British intelligence recruited the muscle power to overthrow Premier Mohammed Mossadeq in 1953. Decades later, during the tumultuous events of 1978 and 1979, the zurkhanehs provided some of the brawn that ousted the shah.[13]

Zurkhaneh attendance aside, Soleimani also attended a local mosque, where he fell under the spell of a charismatic preacher named Reza Kamyab. Born in the shrine city of Mashhad in eastern Iran, Kamyab was only a few years older than Qassem but possessed the education and status of a middle-ranking cleric in Iran's Shia hierarchy. More significantly for our story, Kamyab was a protégé of the exiled Ayatollah Khomeini, whose stinging denunciations of the shah were already legendary in Iran. Qassem Soleimani would later attribute his political awakening to Kamyab and, through him, the formidable Khomeini.[14]

THE IMAM

Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini came from an older generation and different social class than Qassem Soleimani. Born in 1902 in the western Iranian town of Khomein, Ruhollah was destined for the clergy from a very early age and in time would study and teach at the most prominent Shia seminaries: in Najaf (in what is now Iraq) and Qom, Iran's religious capital.[15]

Ruhollah Khomeini was able to join the ranks of the clerical elite, the "Grand Ayatollahs" (*al-Ayatollah al-Uthma*), by virtue of his education, intellect, and charisma. But what clearly set this man apart from his peers was his vociferous criticism of the shah and the White Revolution. The latter was an "attack upon Islam," Khomeini thundered, since it redistributed the vast endowments of land and property that underpinned Iran's clerical establishment.[16]

Khomeini's attacks on the shah landed him in house arrest and exile to Najaf, ultimately to a suburb of Paris. It was in this Iraqi shrine city, seemingly far from the prying eyes of the shah's secret police, that Khomeini crafted his political vision of an Islamic state. In Khomeini's Islamic utopia the rulers would be clerics rather than kings, since only the former possessed the necessary knowledge to administer an Islamic state. Khomeini called his system *Velayat-e Faqih*, "rule of the jurisprudent." The *vali* ("guardian," essentially a scholar-king) would be the most learned Shia cleric of his age. Only the most senior category of Shia Muslim scholars, the Grand Ayatollahs, would possess the necessary credentials to administer and interpret the law of the Islamic state.[17]

Khomeini's ideas percolated throughout Iranian society via cassettes smuggled into the country by his disciples. Among these followers we find Ali Khamenei, the future Supreme Leader; Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, the future president of Iran and de facto number two after Khomeini's death; Hossein Ali Montazeri, at one time Khomeini's designated successor; and Reza Kamyab, Qassem Soleimani's religious mentor. Still, in the early 1970s it looked as if Khomeini's Islamic state would be postponed indefinitely, because the shah seemed nearly invincible. As we have seen, the shah's Iran was awash in petrodollars, and some of that wealth was directed toward weapons, railways, airports, power plants, seaports, universities, and telecommunications.[18] The shah's ambitions became grandiose. In 1974 he confided to a close associate, "But I have so

many more aspirations. To be first in the Middle East is not enough. We must raise ourselves to the level of a great world power. Such a goal is by no means unattainable."[19]

In the shah's expansive vision, Iran would be the "guardian" of the Persian Gulf; accordingly, in 1971 his military occupied several islands near the strategic Strait of Hormuz. Around the same time, his army helped the sultan of Oman suppress a rebellion in Dhofar, a remote province on the border with South Yemen.

However, things were starting to sour for the shah by 1977. First, and most importantly for his psychological stamina, he was diagnosed with cancer. This was known only to a select few, but it must have undermined his own confidence and sapped his strength at a critical moment.[20] Then there was inflation, which seemed to eat away at Iran's newfound prosperity. The large exodus of rural Iranians to the cities was generating social and political trouble, triggered by cultural alienation, housing shortages, and glaring income disparities.[21]

THE REVOLUTION

In 1978 all of these elemental forces came to a head, in the form of mass demonstrations demanding social and economic reform. The shah wavered between a harsh crackdown and concessions. Friend and foe alike sensed indecision and weakness. By January 1979, the country was essentially paralyzed, crippled by labor strikes and the shuttering of schools and universities. On 16 January 1979, the Iranian media broadcast the startling news: "*Shah Raft!*" The shah had fled his country, taking with him his wife and a jar of Iranian soil. He never returned.

Scarcely two weeks later, Iran was shaken by another announcement: "*Imam Amad!*" The Imam—an honorific given to Khomeini by his most dedicated followers—had come. When the ayatollah returned from his Parisian exile on 1 February he was greeted by some of the largest crowds in human history. The shah's caretaker government was swept away in a veritable human tidal wave. A new Iran was about to be created.

The departure of the shah and Khomeini's return marked only the first phase of Iran's improbable revolution. The second pitted multiple ideologies against each other in a lethal struggle. The powerful communist

Tudeh Party occupied one corner of the battlefield, the so-called Islamo-Marxists another. The constitutionalists, who espoused a liberal republic with an elected legislature, defended a rapidly shrinking political turf, having no street muscle of their own. But the most powerful of the contenders were, taken together, those millions of young men and women who rallied to their Imam and demanded an Islamic state. Among them was Qassem Soleimani.

THE REVOLUTIONARY GUARDS

The weeks after Khomeini's return were marked by uncertainty, as factions vied for control of the revolution. It was in this atmosphere that Khomeini's closest advisers persuaded him to create a praetorian guard that would shield him and his revolution from enemies. On 5 May 1979, the new regime announced the creation of the Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Inqilab-e Islami, a paramilitary force that has since gained notoriety in the English-speaking world as the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps.[22]

The IRGC's symbol points to the force's core tenets. A raised assault rifle is superimposed on a globe with a blue backdrop. Underneath the rifle is the year of Iran's Islamic Revolution—1357, which corresponds to AD 1979. A Quranic verse appears along the top of the weapon: "Against them make ready your strength to the utmost of your power." Indeed, Islam as interpreted by the Shia sect is the ethos that underpins the IRGC; the institution is founded on religion, Ayatollah Khomeini, and an Islamic Revolution that will sweep away the world's many tyrants. On the battlefield these principles would translate into reliance on religious zeal rather than technology and the conviction that belief can defeat any man-made weapon.[23]

Khomeini's most dedicated young followers formed the nucleus of the Revolutionary Guards. They were for the most part young men, from a range of backgrounds. Some, like Mohsen Rafiqdoost, came from wealthy Tehran merchant families, but the majority were of the rural and urban poor, with little formal education and scant prospects of upward mobility in the ancien régime. In 1987, a CIA assessment encapsulated some of the essentials of the typical IRGC combatant: "The majority of the Guard's

rank and file is drawn from the younger, uneducated lower class—specifically the urban poor."[24]

In other words, young men like Qassem Soleimani.

2

Baptism by Fire

When we last encountered Qassem Soleimani he was a menial laborer in Kerman City, sending part of his paychecks home to his debt-stricken father. He was attending a zurkhaneh and being captivated by a charismatic cleric named Reza Kamyab, who happened to be an ardent follower of Ayatollah Khomeini. As for many in his generation, the Iranian Revolution came at just the right moment for Soleimani. He had scarcely completed primary school, had few professional skills and, above all, lacked the social status necessary to get ahead in the shah's Iran. Indeed, Soleimani was trying to make ends meet in a country where social disparities were stark and inflation was wiping out savings. At the same time, the young man from Kerman was ambitious and smart. The shah's system, such as it was in 1978, could never accommodate men like Qassem Soleimani. Consequently, when Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran in February 1979, Soleimani was one of the millions who flocked to the Imam's standard.

Sometime in the spring of 1979 Soleimani joined the nascent Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps. He had just turned twenty-two, with no prior military experience, but he was attracted to Khomeini's ideology of Islamic uplift. As Soleimani put it years later, "We were all young and wanted to serve the revolution in some way. This is how I joined the Guards."[1]

Qassem Soleimani was part of the IRGC's "founding generation," in which we also find the future president Mahmud Ahmadinejad; IRGC commanders Mohsen Rezai, Mohsen Rafiqdoost, and Yahya Rahim-Safavi

and a future defense minister, Mohammed Mustafa-Najar. Most were members of Soleimani's generation. Many shared his background of poverty, street smarts, and raw ambition.

The IRGC was a territorial unit. That is, its units each comprised men from the same district, city, or province in Iran. Not surprisingly, local identities and loyalties were always a powerful influence in Revolutionary Guards units, and this small-group loyalty would serve Iran well during the long war with Iraq.[2] Soleimani was an early recruit of a Revolutionary Guards unit formed in Kerman. Many of its members probably were Soleimani's contemporaries in the Kerman City zurkhaneh, while others emerged from the *komiteh* movement (see the glossary) that helped Ayatollah Khomeini seize power.[3]

Soleimani's IRGC company started its existence as light infantry. In other words, its members were equipped with whatever arms could be scrounged from the looted arsenals of the shah's gendarmerie and army. Their training in these weapons was rudimentary at best, but motivation and enthusiasm were supposed mostly to make up for that.[4]

KURDISH UPRISING

The IRGC as a whole, despite its origins as a street militia, was given important missions by the new government, including regime protection and internal security. One of the guards' earliest duties was suppressing revolts among Iranian Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, and Baluch. Iran is a multiethnic country; the Persian population barely exceeds 50 percent.[5] Most of Iran's Kurds reside in the northwest astride the borders with Iraq and Turkey, and when the revolution erupted in 1978 and law and order collapsed, a power vacuum was created there.[6] Consequently, in March 1979, only weeks after Khomeini had returned to Iran, a new Kurdish rebellion broke out, led by a nationalist group called the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI).[7] The KDPI called for Kurdish political autonomy, but Ayatollah Khomeini was in no mood for accommodation: "I want calm in Kurdistan," he warned, "not problems."[8] By August, the ayatollah had declared *jihad* (holy war) against the KDPI, and the newly reconstituted regular army was dispatched to crush the revolt.

The suppression of the Kurdish uprising in the summer of 1979 constituted the IRGC's "baptism by fire." When the regular army's offensives stalled in the face of Kurdish resistance, IRGC units were thrown in piecemeal to help turn the tide. The guards still lacked sufficient arms and equipment, let alone training, but the situation seemed desperate, and Khomeini was determined to impose "Islamic rule" on the Kurds.[9] Once the urban areas of Iranian Kurdistan had been largely pacified, one of Khomeini's most notorious acolytes, Sadeq Khalkhali, was sent there; his summary justice quickly earned him the title "the hanging judge of Kurdistan." He openly boasted about how he had sentenced more than two hundred "rebels" to death in a matter of days. In fact, Khalkhali's death sentences were carried out by Revolutionary Guards, who accompanied his "revolutionary justice" caravan.[10]

Qassem Soleimani, and the Kerman IRGC company that he led, were among the Revolutionary Guards sent to Kurdistan to battle the rebellion. Among the Kermanis' early objectives was the town of Mahabad, a provincial capital and vital communications hub of the embattled northwest. Mahabad changed hands several times in 1979, and the fighting laid waste to a large part of it.[11]

Soleimani gained valuable experience fighting in Iranian Kurdistan. His hard-won knowledge of northwestern Iran, with its Kurdish and Azeri minorities, served him well later on when he advised Iraqi Kurds on how to contain Saddam Hussein and roll back Islamic State jihadists. He also gained firsthand knowledge of insurgency from the perspective of the counterinsurgent. Finally, Soleimani learned more about tribal divisions in Kurdish society and how they could be exploited for Tehran's benefit.

On 3 November 1979, the KDPI declared a unilateral cease-fire. Shortly afterward, Soleimani returned to Kerman, where in the brief interregnum between the Kurdish revolt and Iraq's invasion of Iran he presided over the expansion of his IRGC formation to battalion size. He may also have had a hand in granting the unit its nickname, *Sarollah*, which means "revenge of God" and is an allusion to Imam Hussein, an early, martyred Shia leader. The unit's recruiting pool was enlarged to include Iran's eastern provinces of Kerman, Sistan va Baluchistan, and Hormozgan.[12]

A similar process was taking place in IRGC units across Iran. According to one estimate, by the end of 1981 the guards had grown to 50,000 men.

Four years later, that number exceeded 250,000. It was a dramatic expansion of a force born in the streets during the tumultuous weeks that followed Ayatollah Khomeini's triumphant return to Iran.[13]

EXPORTING KHOMEINI'S REVOLUTION

Prior to Iraq's 1980 invasion of Iran, the Revolutionary Guards focused on internal security duties, such as protecting VIPS, defeating pro-shah opposition elements, suppressing revolts among the ethnic minorities, and serving as the regime's "eyes and ears" in neighborhoods and villages across Iran. An egalitarian ethos pervaded the IRGC, and its training stressed spiritual motivation over weapons and parade-ground skills. At the same time, though, the new leaders of Islamic Iran were preparing the Revolutionary Guards for another mission. Written into the country's 1979 constitution was an imperative to export Khomeini's revolution worldwide, and the IRGC was to play a key role in implementing it.[14]

Just like the militants whose revolutions upended old orders in France in 1789, Russia in 1917, and Cuba in 1959, the Iranian revolutionaries meant to export theirs.[15] Their motivations can be grouped into three categories: the security interests of the Iranian state, Khomeini's messianic ideology, and rejection of the international order. We will examine each of these imperatives in turn, as they provide a useful backdrop for our study of the Qods Force.

NATIONAL SECURITY. Islamic Iran emerged from a tumultuous revolution that left it isolated, exposed, and vulnerable on the world stage. Although its leaders preached "neither East nor West[,] just Islam," the new state would not last long on its own.[16] By exporting its revolution Iran could gain new allies, weaken its enemies, and perhaps achieve regional hegemony. Iranian ambitions for regional leadership did not die with the shah but thrived—in fact, in an exaggerated form—in the Islamic Republic.

KHOMEINI'S IDEOLOGY. Pure state interests alone do not convey the essence of Iran's desire to export its revolution. There was another driver, less innately quantifiable but no less significant. That motive is called faith. In the twentieth century, political Islam—or "Islamism"—emerged as a powerful counter to the Western-inspired ideologies of nationalism, fascism, and communism. By appealing to the "authenticity"

of its origins and claiming divine inspiration, Islamism offered a viable alternative for a Muslim world beset by globalism and a Western-defined international order.[17]

Many Islamists interpret international relations through Quranic exegesis. They perceive a *Dar al-Islam*, a region of peace inhabited by those who acknowledge God's supremacy, juxtaposed against the *Dar al-Harb*, a region of war inhabited by those who reject God and his message. Conflict between these two worlds is inevitable, although the final victory of Islam is never in doubt.

Ayatollah Khomeini adopted the tone and some of the substance of this narrative, reinterpreting some of it to fit his particular vision of Islam and the new international order he intended to establish. To put it another way, Khomeini's Iran would carry out God's work on Earth.[18] Furthermore, the revolution could not thrive on Iranian soil alone: it must be exported so that one day the world as a whole would adopt Khomeini's vision of Islam. The ayatollah framed this mission in these words: "We should try to export our revolution to the world. We should set aside the thought that we do not export our revolution, because Islam does not regard various Islamic countries differently and is the supporter of all the oppressed peoples of the world. On the other hand, all the superpowers and the [great] powers have risen to destroy us. If we remain in an enclosed environment we shall definitely face defeat."[19]

NEW STATE SYSTEM. One fundamental aspect of Khomeinism was the explicit rejection of the nation-state system and its attendant treaties and institutions. In Khomeini's worldview, the only valid sociopolitical institution for all humanity was the Islamic state itself. Exporting that model was therefore a necessary component of his broader assault on an international order that had been created and sustained by an un-Islamic West.[20]

KHOMEINI'S GRAND STRATEGY

From its inception, revolutionary Iran was embedded in an international system that its ideology rejected. More accurately, Iran defied an order that had powerful vested interests, including the United States, the Soviet Union, China, and Western Europe. It was logical to ask how Iran could

possibly match these formidable forces in strength, let alone overthrow the international order. Khomeini's answer was faith. If Islam could defeat two seventh-century superpowers—the Byzantine and Persian Empires—he reasoned, then surely Islamic Iran could crush the "godless" superpowers of the twentieth century.[21]

Khomeini believed in the innately superior power of the Word. The Word was the revelation of Islam, of course, as he (often idiosyncratically) interpreted it. The Word as manifested in Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic Iran would be irresistible to other peoples, especially Muslim states along Iran's borders. Khomeini's worldview was framed by the fervent belief that ideas were all-powerful. "It does not take swords to export this ideology," he argued. "The export of ideas by force is no export."[22]

Khomeini's writings and speeches clearly identified the "enemies" of the Islamic Republic. At the top of the list was the United States, labeled the "Great Satan" by Khomeini and his followers. America was reviled because of the conspicuous role it had played in restoring the shah to his throne in 1953 and keeping him there for the next quarter century. When pro-Khomeini students seized the American embassy in Tehran on 4 November 1979, Iran effectively declared war on the United States, even if the latter did not perceive this at the time.[23] Enemy number two was Israel, often referred to by Iranian officials as the "Zionist entity," or "cancerous tumor," and the like. Israel was rarely spared Khomeini's invective; in a statement to be repeated by many Iranian officials in the future, Khomeini called for Israel to be "removed from the map."[24]

Khomeini was equally consistent in his denunciations of Arab monarchies. Whether it was the emir of Bahrain or the king of Saudi Arabia, the ayatollah held them all up for derision and abuse. He once declared that "monarchy is one of the most shameful and disgraceful reactionary manifestations."[25] Although Saudi-Iranian enmity had deeper roots than Khomeini, there is no doubt that his call to overthrow the Saudi monarchy greatly contributed to the deterioration in bilateral relations that persists to this day.[26]

Finally, there was Iraq. A Shia-majority state ruled by the tyrannical Sunni dictator Saddam Hussein, Iraq was an ambitious, restless, and often ruthless neighbor. The Iranian Revolution caught Saddam Hussein by

surprise (as it did nearly everybody); his relations with Iran, frigid at best in the shah's time, were going to get much worse in Khomeini's.

It was one thing to announce the export of Islamic Revolution but another altogether to carry it out. Covert action, psychological warfare, disinformation, and subversion all require specialized institutions, doctrine, and highly trained personnel if they are to be effective instruments of state policy. In most cases, poorly planned and executed covert action backfires, to the detriment of national prestige and diplomatic credibility. Covert action typically requires years of trial and error as well as ample supplies of money and sustained intelligent management before it can be an effective policy tool.[27] In a very real sense, Iran's Qods Force today is the logical end product of decades of experimenting in the field and theorizing in the academy.

Still, Islamic Iran's covert-action program wasn't exactly starting out with a blank slate when it began in the early 1980s. The country's new rulers had more than two millennia of statecraft on which to draw for examples of subversion. The last shah of Iran, Mohammed Reza, had been a beneficiary of American and British covert action when they helped him regain his throne in 1953. In the 1970s, the shah conducted several covert operations of his own, including training and arming Iraqi Kurds against Baghdad.[28] The primary executor of the shah's covert-action program was his notorious intelligence agency, known by its Persian acronym SAVAK.[29] After the 1979 revolution SAVAK was dismantled, but its assets in the form of intelligence officers, agent networks, and files soon became assets of the new agencies that took SAVAK's place.

ISLAMIC IRAN AND INTELLIGENCE

It took several years for the Islamic Republic to thrash out the roles and missions of its new intelligence community generally. In fact, until the mid-1980s the intelligence, security, and covert-action missions were parceled out to a number of civilian and military agencies (see figure 1). The J2 Security and Intelligence Command, founded during the shah's era, under Khomeini retained its responsibility for military intelligence collection and analysis.[30] Khomeini's interim prime minister, Mehdi Bazargan, set up his own intelligence shop, the Daftar-e Ettelat-e Nakhost Vazir, or Intelligence

Office of the Prime Minister. It did not survive his resignation in November 1979.[31] The Sazman-e Amniyat va Ettelat-e Melat-e Iran (Organization for Security and Intelligence of the People of Iran, or SAVAMA) was created in August 1980, with former SAVAK personnel. SAVAMA's missions were largely limited to intelligence collection and analysis, but also domestic counterintelligence.[32]

In addition to the above-named agencies, several "power ministries" retained intelligence functions of their own. In the early days of the revolution, for example, the foreign ministry possessed some covert-action capabilities, in its innocuous-sounding Department of Research.[33] Iran's embassies were often turned into platforms for subversion. The best example was the Iranian embassy in Damascus, Syria, which functioned, in the words of journalist Robin Wright, as Tehran's "foreign brain center."[34] Ambassador Ali Akbar Mohtashemi-Pur, though a cleric by training, played an instrumental role in funneling Revolutionary Guards and materiel to Lebanon in the early 1980s.[35]

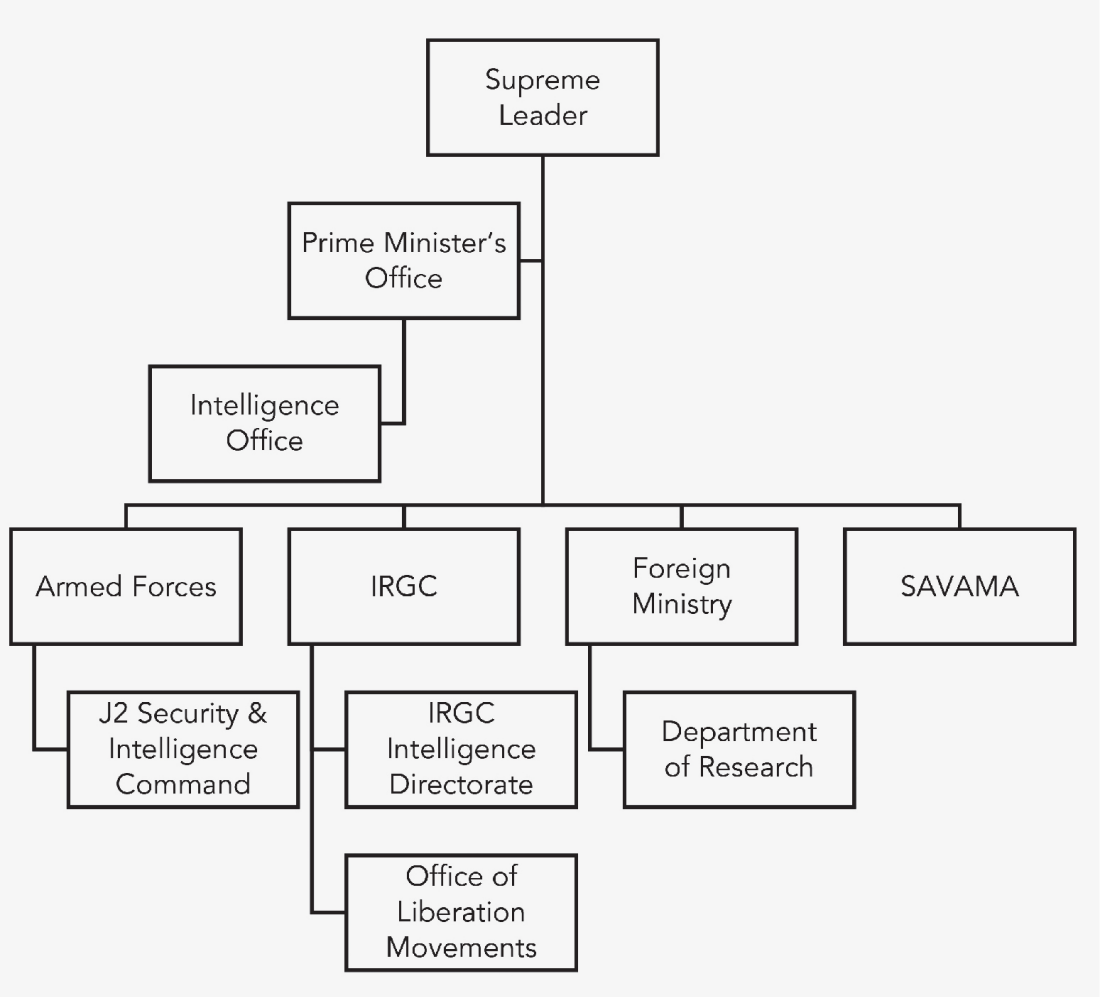

FIGURE 1. Early Iranian Intelligence Community

Seen from within, Iran's early intelligence community was beset by rivalry and duplication. The Office of World Islamic Liberation Movements is a case in point. Based in Tehran and funded directly by Khomeini's personal accounts, the office was nominally supervised by the Revolutionary Guards. It reported, however, to a cleric close to Khomeini, Hossein Ali Montazeri. A squat, rotund little man who delivered sermons in a staccato, high-pitched voice with an M16 assault rifle by his side, Montazeri personally recruited the office's staff (mostly IRGC men) and occasionally visited its training camps.[36]

Ayatollah Montazeri's son, Mohammed Ali, ran the day-to-day affairs of the Liberation Movements Office. Trained by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in Lebanon in the mid-1970s, Mohammed Ali had a

flamboyant (some said erratic) personality that earned him the nickname "Ayatollah Ringo" among foreign correspondents who interviewed him. When Mohammed Ali Montazeri was assassinated by an Iranian opposition group in June 1981, he was replaced at the Liberation Movements Office by a relative, Mehdi Hashemi.[37]

The extravagance of "Ayatollah Ringo" aside, the Liberation Movements Office was in deadly earnest when it came to exporting the Iranian Revolution. The CIA would later estimate that the office spent more than $90 million in the early 1980s on shortwave broadcasting facilities, pamphlets, books, and other propaganda intended for dissemination overseas. A transmitter on Qeshm Island in southern Iran broadcast Arabic-language programming eighteen hours a day. Its intended audience was the Shia Arabs of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Kuwait whom it incited to free themselves from the "talons of Satan."[38]

The Liberation Movements Office supervised a pan-Islamic umbrella organization called the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution. Based in Tehran and led by an Iraqi Shia cleric, Taqi Modaressi, the council drew together a number of exiled dissident groups, such as the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, the Islamic Revolutionary Movement of the Arabian Peninsula, the Islamic Liberation Movement of Bahrain, and Lebanon's Islamic Amal.[39]

But the Liberation Movements Office's main task was training foreign militants at Manzariyeh Park in north Tehran. Later, as Iran's ambitions grew, eight more camps were created, and some were set aside for specific nationalities, such as Afghans or Iraqis.[40] In a 1984 study the CIA identified three phases of terrorist training in Iran. The first was a political indoctrination course that took place in Qom. The second was a threemonth program of small-arms, explosives, communications, and physical training. The third was an advanced weapons course whose participants were carefully vetted and assigned code names for security reasons. Some trainees gained combat experience alongside the IRGC in Iraq.[41]

The consistency of Iran's foreign-fighter training regime over the decades that followed is striking. Many of these same camps are still in use decades later, training a new generation of Lebanese, Iraqi, Afghan, and Yemeni Shia. As did their predecessors decades before, some of the more

promising trainees are introduced to actual combat, now with pro-Iranian militias in Bashar al-Asad's Syria.

The IRGC's Intelligence Directorate (IRGCID), under the leadership of Kazem Kazemi and, later, Ahmed Vahidi, would play an important role in the creation of the Qods Force. Like the Revolutionary Guards as a whole, the department started from scratch, relying in areas like counterintelligence on former SAVAK and military J2 officers, although always led by pro-Khomeini stalwarts.[42] Some accounts suggest the IRGC took over the SAVAK Third Bureau's archives after the revolution. If so, the guards gained access thereby to agent networks and other sensitive material, since the Third Bureau handled internal security for the shah.[43]

The IRGCID was also noteworthy for the perspicacity and street smarts of its early leaders. Men like Mohsen Rezai, Mohsen Rafiqdoost, and Morteza Rezai served in it before moving on to senior posts in the guards. Ahmed Vahidi was chief of the department before becoming the first Qods Force commander in 1990. Later, during the presidency of Mahmud Ahmadinejad, he was appointed defense minister.[44] The IRGCID was ambitious and in constant search of new missions. In addition to regime-security tasks like counterintelligence and monitoring of the loyalties of the armed forces, the department penetrated opposition groups at home and abroad. It collected battlefield intelligence during the war with Iraq and established valuable liaison links with North Korea, Syria, Libya, and the PLO. Finally, having absorbed the Liberation Movements Office in the early 1980s, it was empowered to export the Iranian Revolution via covert action.[45]

Whatever the effectiveness of its components, however, competition, confusion, and disarray marked the Iranian intelligence apparatus as a whole in the early postrevolutionary era. As one summary of Iranian intelligence put it at the time: "Looking at the Iranian authority from its ugly police side we see the image of a multi-headed monster with these heads always snapping at each other."[46] Consolidation of intelligence and covertaction functions was bound to take place. It was only a question of time; it awaited only a major external event, like Iraq's invasion of Iran.

3

War with Iraq

During the summer of 1980 border tensions between Iran and Iraq escalated; airspace violations and cross-border artillery exchanges were frequent. The Iraqi consulate in the city of Khorramshahr was sacked, while Iranian-backed Iraqi opposition groups stepped up an assassination campaign against Baath Party officials. So, when Saddam Hussein ordered his armies to invade Iran on 22 September 1980, nobody should have been much surprised.[1] Unfortunately for the Iraqis, their offensive soon stalled because of ammunition shortages, poor combined-arms coordination, fierce Iranian resistance, and an Iranian Arab population that rejected Iraqi calls to rise up.[2] The Revolutionary Guards played a critical role in slowing the Iraqi advance, and their greatest strength on the battlefield was their motivation. Among the IRGC soldiers mobilized to fight the Iraqis was Qassem Soleimani, who was tasked with ensuring the delivery of fresh water to the front. As he put it years later, “I entered the war on a fifteen-day mission, and ended up staying until the end.”[3]

In 1981 the Sarollah Brigade deployed to Khuzestan in southwestern Iran, where it was thrown into the fight against Iraq under its twentythree-year-old commander, Qassem Soleimani. By the standards of other armies, this was a big responsibility for a man whose only combat experience had been fighting Kurdish rebels. Yet Soleimani’s inexperience was shared by the vast majority of Revolutionary Guards from his peer group. In fact, Soleimani would be still leading the Sarollah when it became a division-sized formation in the mid-1980s.[4]

The year 1982 was a critical turning point in the war. Iran had expelled Iraqi forces from its soil, Saddam Hussein was offering a cease-fire, and the

war could have ended with a restoration of the status quo ante bellum. But Ayatollah Khomeini was in no mood for peace and decided to invade Iraq instead, to overthrow the Baathist regime and replace it with a pro-Iran, Shia-dominated government. This outcome would not only give an immeasurable boost to Iranian influence and prestige but make Iraq available to Tehran as a base from which to export revolution to other countries in the Middle East. In the end, though, Khomeini only condemned both countries to six more years of attrition warfare that essentially bankrupted them both.[5]

UNCONVENTIONAL WARFARE

With conventional victory all but ruled out, both sides resorted to other strategies, including attacking oil tankers, striking cities with ballistic missiles, laying mines in the Persian Gulf, and using insurgent proxies. The Iraqis trained and armed a number of Iranian Arab opposition groups as well as the Mojahedin-e Khalq (People's Mujahedin) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran. At one point during the war, KDPI *Peshmerga* (Kurdish fighters generally) tied down thousands of Iranian security troops in counterinsurgency operations rather than on the front line.[6] For its part, Tehran entered the war with very limited covert-action capabilities. The former SAVAK leadership had been decimated by this time, while dedicated special-forces units created and trained by U.S. Special Forces before the revolution, had lost most of their officers and suffered from poor morale.[7] It took several years for the IRGC's covert-action capabilities to gel. In the meantime, for the first years of the war, the Office of World Islamic Liberation Movements spearheaded Iran's proxy wars against Iraq.[8]

The Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) was the most prominent of Iran's proxies. Founded in 1982 by breakaway members of another Iraqi Shia party, al-Dawa (The Call), SCIRI was intended as an umbrella organization for Iraqis who adhered to Khomeini's ideology. The Liberation Movements Office gave SCIRI safe haven, funding, propaganda outlets, training camps, weapons, and combat tours with Revolutionary Guards units inside Iraq.[9] In 1983 Ayatollah Khomeini gave SCIRI what amounted to its marching orders: "You should aim to form an Islamic government and to implement God's commands. God willing, you will be

successful in your efforts to be a *Mujahid* [warrior] along the path of God. God willing, you will return to Iraq, where we too will join in the Shrine of Imam Hussein, peace be upon him."[10]

In 1982–83, after the Liberation Movements Office was dismantled and its missions transferred to the IRGC Intelligence Directorate, SCIRI was given an armed wing, the Badr Battalion. This unit consolidated under the IRGC aegis all Iraqi Shia forces fighting Saddam. Its primary recruiting pool was Iraqi exiles in Iran (thought to number more than 350,000 by 1984) and the growing number of Iraqi prisoners of war (POWs).[11] From its inception, the Badr was led by IRGC officers and fought alongside IRGC units. When the war ended in 1988, the Badr Battalion had become the 9th Badr Corps of the IRGC.[12]

The Badr unit may have fielded only a small force on the battlefield, but its true impact on the Iranian war effort was felt in other arenas. Its Iraqi officers and rank and file, who were native Arabic speakers, were used extensively to support Iranian operations behind Iraqi lines. They also helped sow anti-Saddam dissent, collected intelligence via interrogations of Iraqi POWs, ran agent networks, and helped translate intercepted Iraqi communications.[13]

The Iraqi Kurds were another valuable IRGC ally. The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) were secular and nationalist in orientation and hence ideologically quite different from SCIRI or the IRGC. When Iraq invaded Iran, SAVAMA, J2, and IRGC resumed aid to the Iraqi Kurds previously supplied by the shah's SAVAK. As a result, a new generation of Iranian covert-action officers forged enduring ties with leaders Masood Barzani of the KDP and Jalal Talabani of the PUK.[14]

RAMAZAN BASE

Throughout the war with Iraq, the Revolutionary Guards Intelligence Directorate ran most of its Iraq-related covert operations from the Ramazan Base, in the Iranian town of Marivan (see map 1). Led by the intelligence operative Morteza Rezai, the Ramazan Base had several operational units assigned to it, including the 9th Badr Division (the Badr Battalion had grown to a division and would eventually constitute a corps), the all-Afghan

Shia Abu Zar Brigade, and the 66th Airborne Special Forces Brigade.[15] Ramazan missions included the infiltration and extraction of agents behind Iraqi lines, battlefield reconnaissance of Iraqi military positions, strategic intelligence collection, sabotage and ambush, and the recruitment, training, and sustainment of proxies.[16] Mohammed Reza Naqdi was one IRGC covert warrior who served at Ramazan Base in the mid-1980s. In a 2016 interview with Iranian media, he described the Ramazan Base's mission as "irregular warfare inside Iraq," adding that "we contacted nomad tribes in Iraq, organized them, established contact, and created bases in Iraq."[17]

The IRGC Ramazan Base represents a classic "economy of force" strategy. With just a handful of trainers and a few hundred fighters operating inside Iraq at any given time, the base was able to tie down the resources of an entire Iraqi combat division plus 80,000 paramilitary fighters.[18] According to one Iraqi general, the strategy was very successful: "This Iranian tactic of collaborating with dissident Iraqi groups caused Iraqi forces to disperse from the south to the north and stretched our line of defense. This forced the Iraqi leaders to confront major battles on two fronts, separated by a considerable distance."[19]

Still, the Ramazan Base's successes were isolated, and those aside, unconventional warfare played a relatively minor role throughout the war. In fact, the images that endure from this conflict are of attrition warfare at its worst: human waves of Revolutionary Guards "martyrdom seekers" mowed down by Iraqi machine guns, corpses bearing the signs of chlorinegas asphyxiation, and an ayatollah frantically urging his men to expend more blood to clear the path "to Karbala." With the exception of the Fao Peninsula operation late in the war, most Iranian offensives stalled with horrifying losses of life.

It is almost trite to say that the eight-year war with Iraq left an indelible mark on soldiers who survived it. It shaped the entire worldviews of young men like Qassem Soleimani. He undoubtedly witnessed suffering on both sides. He certainly saw many friends die, including his cousin and former sidekick Ahmed, who was killed in October 1984.[20] In his postwar existence Soleimani was a regular attendee at commemorations for the dead from this war, which Iranians call the Holy Defense. In his speeches touching on the subject Soleimani rarely restrained himself from openly sobbing, and his words were often loaded with references to "martyrdom."[21]

As he told one interviewer in 2009, “The battlefield is mankind’s lost paradise—the paradise in which morality and human conduct are at their highest. One type of paradise that men imagine is about streams, beautiful maidens, and lush landscape. But there is another kind of paradise—the battlefield.”[22]

MAP 1. Iran-Iraq War

POSTWAR

Many Revolutionary Guards' fortunes were made as a result of the war with Iraq. According to one French account, "Those blessed with real charisma, tenacious character, undeniable military talent, and a good deal of luck rose over their comrades and became true war chiefs."[23] Among these "war chiefs" we should place Qassem Soleimani—after all, he became a division commander at thirty.

Soleimani's career prospects were no doubt enhanced by his links to two powerful men. One was Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, who like Soleimani was from Kerman. During the last few years of the conflict, Rafsanjani was the commander in chief of the Iranian forces, and he often deputized for Khomeini in war councils. Failure in the war did not seem to harm Rafsanjani's prospects much: he would serve two terms as Iran's president, the regime's de facto number-two, and wielded considerable power behind the scenes.[24] The other was the middle-ranking cleric Ali Khamenei, who was president of Iran during much of the 1980s and Supreme Leader after Khomeini's death in 1989. Another "easterner"—he was from Mashhad—Khamenei would preside over the creation of the Qods Force in 1990, select Qassem Soleimani to command it in 1998, and promote him to major general in 2011.[25]

As we will examine in the next chapter, the Iran-Iraq War formed the template for the IRGC's strategy to fight future wars. From its emphasis on faith over technology to the use of proxies for "deep attacks" in the enemy's rear, the guards developed a range of responses to threats posed by neighboring states and America. Indeed, the birth of the Qods Force can be directly traced to lessons learned from the Iran-Iraq War.

4

The Birth of the Qods Force

The eight-year war with Iraq all but exhausted Iran. More than 400,000 Iranian soldiers were killed at the front, while untold thousands more bore physical and mental wounds that never really healed. Many had been victims of Iraqi chemical weapons attacks. Amputees were (and still are) a common sight in Iran's cities, towns, and villages. The nation had barely begun to lick its wounds when another traumatic event beset it: the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in June 1989. He was succeeded as Supreme Leader by Ali Khamenei; Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani ascended to the post of president. Together this pair would rule Iran for the next quarter of a century.

In addition to personnel changes at the very top, postwar realities imposed changes on the Iranian military establishment. Like Iraq, Iran had to demobilize its wartime army yet mitigate any social unrest that resulted from the dumping of thousands of men on the labor market. Indeed, in the months following the cease-fire with Iraq, there was even talk of eliminating the Revolutionary Guards. In the event, the IRGC not only survived but prospered in postwar Iran, thanks in no small part to Khamenei's appointment as Supreme Leader.[1]

At war's end, IRGC units like Qassem Soleimani's Sarollah Division returned home and began the peacetime duties of partial demobilization and the implementation of new training regimes. Fortunately for the Sarollah Division's ambitious young commander, there were still battles to be fought in his area of responsibility. Iran's eastern provinces of Kerman, Hormozgan, Sistan va Baluchistan, and Khorasan lie on the opium and heroin trail that extends from Afghanistan to the Persian Gulf in the south,

Turkey and Europe to the west, and the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union in the north. Soleimani was entrusted with the mission of combating heavily armed drug convoys in Iran's eastern outback.[2]

INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY REFORM

We have already examined some of the crippling limitations that hampered Iran's early intelligence community. There were too many intelligence agencies, with overlapping responsibilities and missions, competing for Khomeini's time and attention; friction was inevitable. The overall intelligence effort was inefficient, and the costs became prohibitive once Iran found itself at war with Iraq.[3]

Iran's parliament was the major spur for intelligence reform. Its efforts culminated in 1983–84 with the creation of the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), also known by its Persian acronym VEVAK—Vezarat-e Ettelaat va Amniyat-e Keshvar (not to be confused with the shah's SAVAK).[4] From its inception, MOIS was intended to coordinate domestic and foreign intelligence collection and analysis. Consequently, it absorbed several agencies in their entirety, like SAVAMA, fought hard to take control of the IRGC Intelligence Directorate's domestic security functions.[5]

MOIS is a powerful ministry in Iran. Domestically, it maintains a presence that extends down to the provincial, municipality, and even district levels. Its broad interpretation of its writ to combat dissent, neutralize antiregime conspiracies, and roll up foreign espionage networks has had damaging consequences for Iran's human-rights record. MOIS also maintains a large network of overseas stations and bases that monitor Iranian expatriate communities, liaise with foreign intelligence services, spy on targets of interest, gather sensitive materials for Iran's nuclear and military industries, and carry out assassinations of dissidents.[6] The CIA estimates that MOIS and its predecessor SAVAMA carried out between them at least eighty targeted assassinations of Iranians overseas between 1980 and 1995.[7]

Creating new intelligence bureaucracies is often fraught with conflict, since they threaten a delicate status quo where secret information often equates to power. MOIS, which drained budgetary resources and staff from agencies it didn't supersede outright, faced determined bureaucratic

resistance in its early days. Not surprisingly, given their broad security mandate and ambition, the Revolutionary Guards turned out to be MOIS' most intractable and powerful adversaries. One player in IRGC intelligence at the time of MOIS' creation later recalled, "We had many arguments with the late Mr. Movahhedi Savoji, who at the time was head of the National Security Committee in the Majles [Iran's parliament, also transliterated Majlis]. He was very firm that the intelligence department must become a ministry so that it could be held accountable to the Majles. In any case, they overcame us in the end."[8]

If information is power, then the currency with which it is bought and sold in the intelligence business comprises sources, experienced officers, records of current operations, and archives of previous ones. Eventually MOIS made off with 90 percent of the IRGC's domestic intelligence staff, and thereafter has remained an archrival of the IRGCID for missions and funding.[9] Still, as we shall see, although MOIS won some of its early fights the bureaucratic turf wars were far from over. In just a few short years, the IRGCID was able to snatch back several missions and dramatically expand its capabilities in the covert-action arena.[10]

IRANIAN COVERT ACTION

Iran's constitution outlines a formal structure for national-security decisionmaking. A Supreme Council for National Security (SCNS) is usually chaired by the president, and its meetings are attended by the foreign, intelligence, and interior ministers, among others. But Iranian leaders probably realized early on that the SCNS was too large for supervising sensitive missions like assassinating dissidents or supporting terrorist groups. Therefore, just as the U.S. government created smaller, more select decision-making bodies for covert action in the National Security Council, so too did the Iranians develop their own "compartmented" decision structure for covert action.

During the ten years (1979–89) that he served as Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini ran sensitive covert operations out of his own office. After he died, new institutions were created, such as the Intelligence and National Security Committee, which was chaired by Rafsanjani and included the ministers of foreign affairs and intelligence, as well as the

Revolutionary Guards commander. This committee developed plans for terrorism, assassinations abroad, and foreign influence campaigns. In its early years the committee was dominated by the MOIS, which not only drafted the plans but executed most of them as well.[11] Such projects prepared by the Intelligence and National Security Committee were referred to the Special Action Committee for final review and authorization. Throughout much of the 1990s Special Action Committee members included Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, President Rafsanjani, Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati, Intelligence Minister Ali Fallahian, and Mohsen Rezai in his role as IRGC commander.[12]

According to testimony by MOIS defectors, the Special Action Committee not only approved covert operations but decided which agency would carry them out. Practically speaking, only two organizations had the resources and expertise: MOIS and the Revolutionary Guards. In the early 1990s the MOIS took the lead role in most covert operations abroad, including the assassinations of dissidents. This undoubtedly was owing to the ambitiousness of the service's leader, Ali Fallahian, not to mention its skilled and experienced practitioners of sensitive, compartmented operations.[13]

THE QODS FORCE

But a new competitor soon emerged and began to compete with MOIS for missions and funding. Created in March 1990 within the IRGC command structure, the Qods Force likely represented part of Ali Khamenei's payback to the IRGC for its support of his bid to become Supreme Leader.[14] Somewhat surprisingly, given the outsized role it would eventually play in foreign policy, the Qods Force's existence was first made public in a seemingly innocuous statement by Khamenei's personal representative to the IRGC. In March 1990 this cleric announced that the IRGC would send "military consultants" to assist foreign militaries and liberation movements. "It is the legal obligation of the Revolutionary Guards to support liberation movements [i.e., to export the Islamic Revolution]," he emphasized, and "arrangements have been made within the organization of the Revolutionary Guard to this effect."[15]

Al-Qods (The Holy) is the Islamic term for Jerusalem, and it has long been a declared objective of the Islamic Republic to "liberate" this city from Israeli occupation. Furthermore, the Qods Force has publicly proclaimed its adherence to Ayatollah Khomeini's demand that Israel "be wiped off the map." In addition, the Qods Force has subverted regimes in Iraq, the Persian Gulf, Egypt, and the Maghreb. It also devotes considerable energy to expelling the United States from the Middle East via terrorism and insurgent proxies.

To carry out its mandate of exporting Iran's Islamic Revolution, the Qods Force performs several discrete but interrelated tasks. It has some responsibility for the IRGCID's strategic and battlefield reconnaissance functions. It creates, trains, finances, and arms numerous foreign organizations, such as Lebanese Hezbollah, Afghanistan's Hezb-e Wahdat, the Saudi Hezbollah al-Hejaz, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine–General Command. Although it prefers to work through "cutouts," intermediaries, to disguise its hand, the Qods Force has occasionally dabbled in what its American counterparts call "direct action": actually pulling the trigger. Finally, the Qods Force engages in information and influence operations in countries, such as Iraq, Lebanon, and Afghanistan, deemed essential to Iranian national interests.[16]

As is true in the U.S. Army Special Forces, noncommissioned officers are the heart and soul of the Qods Force; they often serve in the unit throughout their military careers. Language ability and cultural familiarity relevant to foreign operating areas are a must, since training foreign fighters constitutes one of the Qods Force's primary missions. It is a given, however, that a Qods Force candidate must be vetted by IRGC counterintelligence experts to determine his loyalties and highlight any questionable behavior in his past.[17]

Supreme Leader Khamenei probably played a hands-on role in selecting his first Qods Force commander, since the unit frequently carries out sensitive missions on his orders alone. His choice fell on Brigadier Ahmed Vahidi, a career IRGC officer and a contemporary of Qassem Soleimani. Born with the surname Shahcheraghli (he changed it after the revolution to remove any objectionable references to the shah), he had been studying electrical engineering at Shiraz University when the first big anti-shah demonstrations rocked Iran in 1978. At first Vahidi enrolled in his

university's pro-Khomeini action committee, but when the IRGC was created during the spring of 1979 he transferred to that institution.[18] Unlike his successor as Qods Force commander, Qassem Soleimani, Vahidi came to the job with an extensive background in intelligence. He was a founder member of the IRGC's Intelligence Directorate and served in Lebanon, where he gained important experience in covert action. During the Iran-Iraq War Ahmed Vahidi directed the IRGCID, helping plan early IRGC covert operations involving Iraqi Kurds and Shia dissidents.[19] The only public notification of Vahidi's Qods Force assignment came in a cryptic announcement by the IRGC public relations office in May 1990, two months after the first, oblique reference to the new entity. Vahidi, it was now declared, had been appointed deputy chief of the IRGC General Staff for *ettelaat* (information, or intelligence). No public notice was given that Vahidi's new unit was called the Qods Force.[20]

Over the years that followed, more details came to light about the Qods Force's name, missions, leadership, and reporting chain. It is widely believed, for example, that the Qods Force commander reports directly to the Supreme Leader, for security reasons.[21] Its headquarters is understood to be in the former U.S. embassy in Tehran.[22] Its name aside, the Qods Force has always been about more than "liberating" Jerusalem: Saddam's 1980 invasion of Iran ensured that Iraq would be the primary enemy of the Islamic Republic even after the war. In fact, Department 1000 of the Qods Force is focused on Iraq, and its numerical first place among the Qods Force's geographical departments is probably indicative of Iraq's central place in Iran's national-security priorities.

The Qods Force's structure parallels that of its two predecessors: the Office of World Islamic Liberation Movements and the foreign-operations arm of the IRGC Intelligence Directorate. Although information on the Qods Force's geographical departments is spotty and contradictory, table 1 offers a "guesstimate" of the organization's regional responsibilities.

Qods Force Department	**Name**	**Region of Responsibility**
Department 1000	Ramazan Corps	Iraq
Department 2000	Lebanon Corps	Lebanon
Department 3000	Palestine Corps	Palestinian "resistance" groups

Department 4000	Ansar Corps	Afghanistan
Department 5000	Hamza Corps	Turkey
Department 6000	?	Gulf Arab states
Department 7000	?	Americas
Department 8000	?	Africa
Department 9000	?	Special external operations

TABLE 1. Regional Responsibilities of the Qods Force Departments

The creation of the Qods Force represented an important leap forward in Iran's ability to conduct covert action abroad, especially in proxy wars. At the same time, the IRGC laid the foundations for the long-term study of unconventional warfare, with the creation of the Qods Force College in 1990 or 1991.[23] As the next chapter details, Lebanon was to be an important testing ground for many of these unconventional-warfare concepts and ideas throughout the 1990s.

5

The Lebanon Corps

Iraq was always going to be Iran's top priority, and for a number of reasons, including their shared border, the presence of important shrine cities on Iraqi soil, and the legacy of hatred and suspicion sown during their fruitless eight-year war. The next in line was Lebanon. The reason was not immediately obvious: Lebanon does not border Iran, its population is much smaller than Iraq's, it has never posed a threat to Iran, and it is not home to any important Shia shrine. Rather, Lebanon is important to Iran because Hezbollah, the Shiite "Party of God," is important to Iran, and Lebanon is its base. The Revolutionary Guards helped create Hezbollah in the early 1980s, and they have used this Lebanese political party/militia as a policy instrument ever since.

THE HEZBOLLAH MODEL

In many respects, Hezbollah represents Iran's most tangible foreign-policy success since 1979. Hezbollah is not only a reliable foreign proxy, it is well trained, superbly organized, and disciplined, and it is a dedicated follower of Ayatollah Khomeini's *Velayat-e Faqih* (Rule of the Jurisprudent). Finally, thanks to its access to Lebanese émigré communities around the world, Hezbollah gives Iran global reach. As we shall examine in this and subsequent chapters, the ability to retaliate against Israeli and other targets overseas is a fundamental aspect of Iran's deterrence strategy.

Lebanon's civil war in the 1980s constituted for the IRGC both a training ground and a laboratory for its early experiments in unconventional warfare. The Revolutionary Guards forged not only a potent ally in

Hezbollah but within it a terror cell, the Islamic Jihad Organization (IJO). In addition, Hezbollah was the gold standard for the integration of information operations with insurgent and terrorism strategies. In fact, Hezbollah has become so valuable a tool of Iranian influence building that Tehran has tried to replicate the model in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and several countries on the Persian Gulf.[1]

Origins of the Lebanon Corps

The story of Hezbollah begins with the June 1982 invasion of Lebanon by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). The initial Israeli objective was to drive Palestine Liberation Organization guerrillas out of Katyusha-rocket range of northern Israel, but the IDF soon got sucked into the Lebanese morass of warlords, factions, and sects.[2] The Israelis did not extricate themselves from Lebanon until 2000, leaving Hezbollah resolved that Israel's northern border would never know peace.

When Israel invaded southern Lebanon, the Iranian government was initially divided over how to respond. Some of Khomeini's aides advised caution, noting that Iranian forces were already heavily committed to fighting the Iraqis and arguing that none could be spared for another war beyond Iran's borders. Others, especially in the IRGC, pressed for action: Lebanon not only offered a good opportunity to export Khomeini's revolution but gave the Revolutionary Guards an opportunity to strike at the Israelis.[3] But the ayatollah had to be persuaded of the case for Lebanon. Like many of his advisers, he suspected the IDF invasion was intended to distract Iran from inflicting a death blow against Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Deal with Saddam first, Khomeini believed, and Lebanon could be tackled later on.[4] Eventually the ayatollah agreed to a compromise: the IRGC would deploy a small force to Lebanon to train Lebanese and Palestinian militias for the war against Israel.[5]

On 12 June 1982, an Iranian air force B707 carrying an IRGC advance party landed at Damascus International Airport, where it was met by the influential Iranian ambassador to Syria, Ali Akbar Mohtashemi-Pur. After introductions the soldiers boarded buses for the Syrian border town of al-Zabadani. For decades, Zabadani had served as a hub for local smuggler

networks on the Syrian-Lebanese border, but now it was transformed into the IRGC's primary logistics hub for operations in Lebanon.[6] Soon more Revolutionary Guards arrived at Zabadani, crossing the porous border into Lebanon's Bekaa Valley. Eventually, more than a thousand IRGC men entered Lebanon, in earnest of a decades-long investment of Iranian blood and treasure in the Shia of Lebanon.[7]

The fighters constituted the Lebanon Corps, which in its early days reported to Ambassador Mohtashemi-Pur in Damascus and the Office of World Islamic Liberation Movements in Tehran. When the latter was absorbed by the Revolutionary Guards in the early 1980s, the IRGC Intelligence Directorate supervised operations in Lebanon. Finally in the early 1990s, after a decade of trial and error in managing one of Iran's largest "covert" operations (the covert aspect was little more than a fig leaf), the Lebanon Corps was folded into the Qods Force.[8]

Headquartered in a former Lebanese army barracks in Baalbek, the IRGC contingent maintained a low profile, spreading Khomeini's ideology via seminars, local radio broadcasts, and print media. At the same time, though, the Iranians were also collecting intelligence on local politics and keeping a close eye on the Israeli military at the southern end of the valley. The Lebanon Corps forged alliances with such local Shia allies as Islamic Amal and the pan-Islamic Dawa Party.[9] It was only after these foundations had been laid that the IRGC proceeded to the next phase of its plan—the recruitment and training of its own Lebanese Shia militia. Unlike the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, which was founded around the same time, this new organization consisted of both political party *and* militia.[10]

Founding Hezbollah

The IRGC approach to creating Hezbollah was characterized by patience—the slow and methodical development of political and military capabilities. Caution and orderliness would characterize many future Qods Force operations as well. The early IRGC operatives in Lebanon had their eye on the long-term development of human networks for intelligence, logistics, and ultimately, of course, political and military operations.[11] Another

hallmark of IRGC operations in Lebanon was its emphasis on the “hearts and minds” dimension. The historian David Crist describes the IRGC trainers in Lebanon “as both social welfare agents and military advisers. They funded schools and organized basic services such as trash collection and sewage systems.”[12]

Still, the IRGC could never have operated in Lebanon without the assistance of local allies. Most of its soldiers did not speak Arabic, let alone the local Levantine dialects. With only a few exceptions, the Revolutionary Guards who deployed to Lebanon in the early 1980s did not know the country or its myriad cultures particularly well. Ultimately IRGC mission success depended on a loyal Lebanese “player” that knew the language, the customs, and the clannish structure of Lebanese society. Hezbollah was to be that player.

Over time, Hezbollah has become different things to different people. In Lebanon it is often regarded as a well-endowed political party that wields considerable influence via social welfare projects and a well-honed propaganda machine. In 2006, after it fought the IDF to a draw, Hezbollah became famous throughout much of the Arab world for its role in “defeating” Israel.[13] But for many Israelis, Americans, French, and others, Hezbollah is synonymous with terrorism.

Islamic Jihad

For decades until his death in 2008 Imad Faiz Mughniyah was the leader of the IJO, Hezbollah’s terrorism wing. Born in 1962 near Tyre to a Shiite family, Mughniyah was part of a generation destined to serve as frontline fighters in Lebanon’s civil war. Mughniyah was serving in PLO leader Yasser Arafat’s personal bodyguard when he was noticed and recruited by the IRGC garrison in Baalbek.[14] At the time Mughniyah must have seemed like the perfect candidate to spearhead the Revolutionary Guards’ most sensitive covert operations in Lebanon: he had combat experience, he had no publicly known links with Lebanese militias, and he must have demonstrated a certain flair for clandestine work. As one Israeli military intelligence officer observed years later, “He is one of the most creative and

brilliant minds I have ever come across. He is a man with deep understanding, an excellent technical grasp and leadership ability."[15]

Imad Mughniyah and his Hezbollah-IJO associates unleashed a string of meticulously planned terrorist spectaculars in the 1980s that were infamous for their high death tolls and use of suicide bombers. The roll call from this pre-9/11 era is numbing:

- 11 November 1982. A suicide car bomber struck the IDF headquarters in Tyre, Lebanon, killing eighty-nine.
- 18 April 1983. A suicide truck bomber detonated approximately two thousand pounds of explosives near the American embassy in Beirut, killing sixty-three.
- 23 October 1983. A suicide truck bomber successfully penetrated security barriers and struck a barracks housing the U.S. Marine Corps peacekeeping force in Beirut. Two hundred forty-one Marines were killed in the single-most-lethal terrorist attack on American citizens before 11 September 2001.
- 23 October 1983. At approximately the same time that the Marines were hit, a separate suicide bomber attacked the barracks of the French peacekeeping force in Beirut. Fifty-eight were killed.
- 20 September 1984. A suicide bomber got through security around the American embassy annex in Beirut and detonated his bomb. Twenty-four were killed.[16]

Plausible deniability presented a serious challenge for counterterrorism experts in each of these attacks. Unlike many of the Palestinian factions, who promptly claimed responsibility for their terrorist acts, Hezbollah often shied away from publicity. Although it proclaimed its sympathy for the bombers, Hezbollah rarely took "credit" for the attacks, instead putting forward cover identities like "Jihad," "Revolutionary Justice Organization," "Organization of the Oppressed of the Earth," or "Ansar Allah."[17] As a result, it was notoriously difficult for investigators to link Hezbollah to any terrorist attack; even the exact relationship between the Party of God and its terrorist affiliate remained unknown for years (see figure 2).[18]

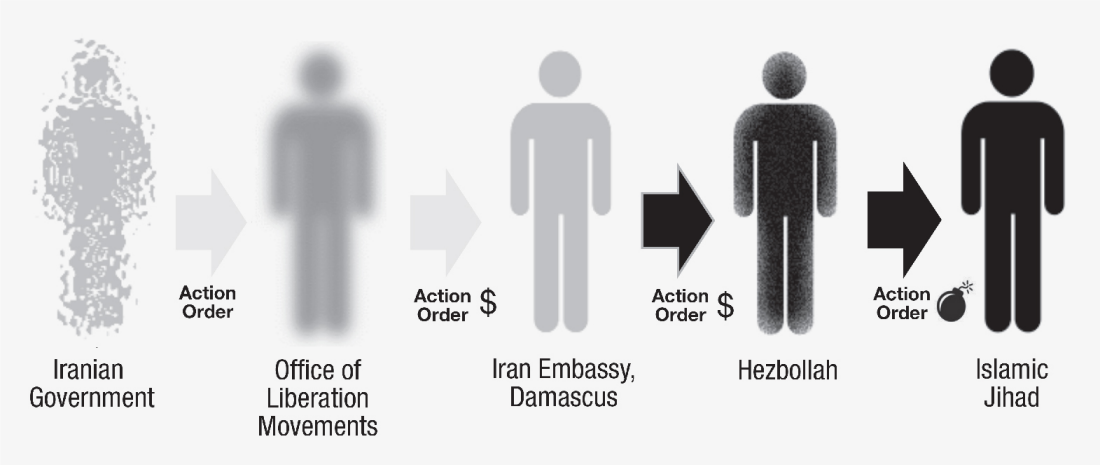

FIGURE 2. The Plausible-Deniability Dilemma

If it was difficult to expose Hezbollah's hand in terrorism, Iran's role as sponsor, paymaster, and trainer was murkier still. Forensic experts pored over the evidence, and intelligence analysts sifted through the "chatter" that preceded and followed terrorist incidents; it was conceivable that sooner or later a Hezbollah link could be established. The exact Iranian role was almost always even harder to discern.[19] To put it another way, Hezbollah terrorism confronted American intelligence experts with the attribution problem: *Who did it, and why*? The policy maker naturally wants something "firm" and "clear-cut" from the intelligence community, the proverbial smoking gun that frames the perpetrator and justifies any retaliation that might follow. Unfortunately, such evidence was rarely available when the policy maker needed it most—in the immediate aftermath of the attack when public pressure for a military response was at its greatest. Instead, it took years of painstaking investigative work before even the faintest shadow of Iranian fingerprints on a given terrorist attack became evident, and by that time the motivation to retaliate had all but vanished.

THE WAR AGAINST ISRAEL

Like its Iranian patron the Lebanese proxy was determined to destroy Israel, and the first step in that process was getting the IDF out of Lebanon. Between 1982 and 1984 Hezbollah killed some six hundred Israeli soldiers in Lebanon. This was a very high number to absorb for a small country averse to casualties. Hezbollah exploited that aversion as a weakness.[20]

Hezbollah remains a small and tightly compartmented organization, at its inner core. Well known to be difficult to penetrate with spies, Hezbollah has, by and large, proven immune to what Israeli intelligence calls the "three *K*'s": *kesef* (money), *kavod* (respect), and *kussit* (a female body part). Ultimately, what this meant was that Hezbollah could succeed where Arab armies and the PLO before it had failed: fighting and winning against the IDF on battlefields that it—not the IDF—chose.[21]

In two major respects the United States shared with Israel the same Iranian affliction: both were priority targets in Iran's global war, and both were largely oblivious to the fact throughout the 1980s. In the end, the Israelis learned a hard lesson: Iran effectively bordered on Israel (i.e., via Hezbollah in southern Lebanon), but Israel did not border Iran. And that has made all the difference.

SYMBIOSIS

Iran and Hezbollah have a symbiotic relationship that makes it sometimes difficult to discern where one really ends and the other begins. Theirs is a mutual-benefit association. Hezbollah, for its part, has been made better equipped than many Arab armies. It also receives extensive intelligence assistance, not to mention Iranian financing that has been variously estimated at between $200 million and $700 million per year.[22] Such financial resources enable Hezbollah to do things that other Lebanese political parties cannot, such as building medical clinics, providing agricultural credit, clearing streets of trash, educating the young, and cutting checks to those who lose their homes in wars (wars that Hezbollah itself has often provoked).[23] As for Iran, Hezbollah gives it the stature of a Middle East power, with invaluable leverage over Lebanon, Syria, and effectively Israel. It helps Iran play the public-relations game of "being more Palestinian than the Palestinians" by consistently adopting hard-line positions that have helped stymie several Arab-Israeli peace initiatives. Finally, as we shall see in the next chapter, Hezbollah gives Iran a platform from which the Revolutionary Guards Qods Force can project power around the world.

6

The Hezbollah Trojan Horse

The Lebanese are among the world's greatest migrants. Starting in the nineteenth century and accelerating in the twentieth, Lebanese immigrants showed up in some surprising places, such as Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina, Senegal, Nigeria, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. It isn't about wanderlust—an innate desire to travel and live in different parts of the world—it's about overpopulation and land shortages in Lebanon. It's also about the Lebanese gift for trade and commerce.[1] Lebanese communities abroad are often microcosms of society back home. They are divided between the religiously devout and secularists. There are the usual squabbles among communists and socialists, not to mention the many inter-and intrasectarian tensions that characterize Lebanon itself today.

HEZBOLLAH ABROAD

Hezbollah uses its native knowledge of Lebanese family and clan networks to recruit in Shiite communities overseas. Some expatriate Lebanese Shia help Hezbollah gather intelligence, raise funds, manage logistics and, on occasion, carry out terrorism operations. Hezbollah's access to Lebanese Shia emigrants is a definite asset for Iran too. As a 1987 CIA assessment put it, "there is growing evidence … that Iran can call on Hizballah to conduct acts of terrorism outside Lebanon, particularly in Western Europe and West Africa."[2]

This CIA report did not mention another part of the world where Hezbollah was blazing a new path: South America's Tri-Border Area, which includes Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay. Some 20,000 to 30,000

Arabs live here, and most of them are from Syria and Lebanon. For decades the Tri-Border Area has been haphazardly monitored by the customs and immigration authorities of the countries concerned, and as a consequence many illegal immigrants are funneled through here. Some are dealing in forged documents, drugs, arms, counterfeiting, and pirated music, films, and software.[3]

Hezbollah began forming cells in the Tri-Border Area during the mid-1980s. Some Hezbollah associates set up local businesses, while others discreetly peddled the latest proclamations of the Hezbollah and Iranian leadership in local mosques. Collecting intelligence on local politics and police was always a priority, necessary to ensure that a regular share of local profits made their way back to the Hezbollah leadership in Beirut. On occasion, Hezbollah resorted to cruder tactics, like extortion and harassment, to keep that money flowing.[4]

As for Iran, we can discern two broad motives for its outreach to Latin America. One is exporting Khomeini's Islamic Revolution, by winning new converts in unlikely places. The other is deterring the United States and Israel from attacking Iran, by maintaining a sophisticated network of terror cells worldwide. In fact, Latin America was the scene of early Iraniansponsored terrorist activity: at least three terrorist attacks on Israeli or Jewish targets can be traced back to Iran via Hezbollah. Each appears to have been triggered by events in Lebanon.

By the mid-1980s, the Israel Defense Forces had partially extracted itself from its Lebanese quagmire. A series of staged withdrawals from Beirut had left the IDF in control of a security zone in southern Lebanon, maintained with the help of local Lebanese allies. This narrow belt of territory was beleaguered by Hezbollah "resistance" forces for years: tit-for-tat attacks were common, and a set of rules (written and unwritten) seem to have governed this low-grade but nonetheless deadly conflict.[5]

ISRAELI EMBASSY BOMBING

On 16 February 1992, the IDF apparently violated those rules when its AH-64 Apache gunships fired Hellfire missiles at a car convoy in southern Lebanon. Their target was Hezbollah's secretary general, Seyed Abbas al-Musawi. This was clearly a targeted killing and marked the first time the

Israelis had killed a paramount Hezbollah leader.[6] In the aftermath, Hezbollah and Iran's Revolutionary Guards agreed that prompt retaliation was necessary to deter future Israeli attacks of this nature. A signal had to be sent to the Israelis that red lines had been crossed, and accordingly the response would not be limited to the usual battleground of southern Lebanon.

When used as an instrument of state policy, terrorism requires detailed planning, comprehensive logistics, skilled and experienced operatives, superb operational security, and reliable overseas networks. As they planned their retaliation for al-Musawi's assassination, Hezbollah and Iran likely calculated that the faster and more lethal it was, the more potent a deterrent it would be. They agreed that the best target for their retaliatory strike was the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Hezbollah had already developed cells in this region that could assist in the plot; Iran's point man was a local cleric, Mohsen Rabbani.[7]

Mohsen Rabbani is a good example of Tehran's methodical, long-term approach to subversion and terrorism. With his carefully trimmed beard, glasses, and white turban he was typical of the many clerics who graduate from Iranian seminaries every year. Born in Mashhad in 1952, Rabbani was just a few years older than Qassem Soleimani and like him had come of age during the Iranian Revolution.[8] Mohsen Rabbani arrived in Buenos Aires on 27 August 1983 armed with a ninety-day tourist visa. But he was no tourist: Rabbani turned out to be a "cultural" emissary, intent on exporting Iran's revolution to South America. Later, an Argentine investigator would describe Rabbani as the "driving force" behind Iran's terrorism and influence operations in the Southern Cone countries of Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, and Paraguay.[9]

Rabbani claimed to be a personal representative of Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, who, as we have seen, led Iran's Office of World Islamic Liberation Movements in the early 1980s. He learned Spanish, curried favor with Argentina's small Shia community, and helped build or refurbish three mosques. Two of these (Al-Tawhid and Al-Imán) were located in greater Buenos Aires, the third (El-Mártir) in San Miguel de Tucumán in northwest Argentina.[10]

By the early 1990s, Mohsen Rabbani had developed religious and clandestine networks in South America, and Hezbollah was managing

specific terrorism projects as Iran's proxy and cutout. Asad Ahmed Barakat was the central figure in the Hezbollah operational network in Argentina. Born in Lebanon, Barakat was one of thousands of Lebanese refugees who fled their country's civil war during the 1980s for South America. He settled in the Paraguayan city of Punta del Este, where he ran several thriving import-export businesses in the Tri-Border Area smugglers' haven. At the same time, Barakat was a local Hezbollah fundraiser, looked after some of the organization's business concerns in South America, and shipped home an annual share of his profits.[11]

Still, the Mohsen Rabbani and Asad Ahmed Barakat networks alone were not capable of bombing an embassy. This is where Imad Mughniyah's Islamic Jihad Organization enters the picture. An IJO team was sent to the Tri-Border Area to liaise with Barakat and execute the embassy "hit."[12] According to the Israeli researcher, Ronen Bergman, "The model [had] been used before: a Hizballah agent would leave Lebanon for the target zone equipped with forged papers supplied by the Iranian embassy in Beirut. The agent would recruit Shi'ite residents of the zone, well versed in the customs and conduct of the local population as a 'local support cell.'"[13]

March 17, 1992, was a hot summer day in Buenos Aires. At approximately 2:45 that afternoon an explosion shook a building at 910/916 Arroyo Street. One witness near the scene "saw a tremendous cloud of dust above Arroyo Street in Recoleta that was similar to but smaller than the Hiroshima explosion we had seen on our television screens."[14] This was the site of the Israeli embassy. Twenty-nine were killed and more than two hundred wounded.[15]

The Argentine capital's first responders—firefighters, police, and medics—arrived at the scene and tried to impose some order on a chaotic situation. The country's national intelligence service, the Secretaría de Inteligencia del Estado (SIDE), soon showed up as well, led by its counterintelligence operations chief, Jaime Stiuso. Stiuso knew a lot about political violence, being a veteran of Argentina's "dirty war" against dissidents in the 1970s and early 1980s, but this was something different. As journalist Gerardo Young recalled later, "Like everybody else [Stiuso] didn't understand what happened. He wasn't prepared for this. He knew how to tap the phones and track opponents at close hand. He knew how to investigate the delinquents

of the Buenos Aires area. What did he know about international terrorism? Nothing. No one knew a thing."[16]

The Islamic Jihad Organization claimed responsibility for the bombing in a statement delivered to a news agency in Beirut. It made clear that the attack was in retaliation for Hezbollah leader al-Musawi's death. As the IJO communique put it, the bombing was "one of our continuing strikes against the criminal Israeli enemy in an open-ended war which will not cease until Israel is wiped out of existence."[17] The IJO released a prebombing surveillance video of the embassy to substantiate its claim.[18]

The Israelis themselves played an important role in the investigation. Within hours of the bombing, a team of Shin Bet and Mossad (the Israeli internal and external security agencies, respectively) and police experts was sent to Buenos Aires to help sift through the wreckage for clues. Eventually they found the remnants of an engine block belonging to a Ford F-100 pickup. A trace of the vehicle identification number, or VIN, allowed investigators to determine that the truck had been rented by a "foreign" customer using false documents.[19] Consequently, Mossad concluded that the attack had been perpetrated by Hezbollah on behalf of Iran, adding a warning of "a clear and present danger that the next attack is on its way."[20]

In the aftermath of the embassy bombing, Argentina's intelligence service stepped up its surveillance of Iranian diplomats in Buenos Aires as well as of the cleric Mohsen Rabbani and his family. Rabbani may have been aware of this surveillance when he requested (and surprisingly received) diplomatic accreditation to Argentina as a cultural attaché and with it diplomatic immunity. Around the same time, $150,000 was wired from Iran to a Deutsche Bank account in Mohsen Rabbani's name. He eventually withdrew $94,000 from this account, perhaps for the 1994 attack on a Jewish cultural center in Buenos Aires (see the following section).[21]

In addition to Iranian officials like Rabbani, the Argentine SIDE also monitored several Shiite mosques in Buenos Aires and throughout the Tri-Border Area, recording their phone calls and meetings.[22] Unfortunately, SIDE lacked sufficient Persian and Arabic translators to produce meaningful intelligence, so the agency turned to the Israelis.[23] According to one SIDE officer, the Israelis contributed greatly to the SIDE's overall understanding of Middle East terrorism: "We have good information on what's going on in South America, but who can understand the difference

between Hamas and Hizballah? That's very important when it comes to telephones. We can listen in to the calls, but we have no idea whom they are calling in Gaza, Paris, or Beirut."[24]

Otherwise, however, the Argentine investigation into the embassy bombing was plagued by incompetence, corruption, false allegations, and official obstruction. The Supreme Court of Argentina nonetheless ruled in 1999 that the Islamic Jihad Organization was the guilty party and urged the international arrest of Hezbollah's Imad Faiz Mughniyah, head of the IJO. No mention was made of a possible Iranian role and, as of 2021, there have been no convictions.[25]

THE AMIA BOMBING

On 18 July 1994, at precisely 9:53 in the morning local time, a suicide bomber detonated a car bomb next to the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina, better known now by its Spanish acronym AMIA. The AMIA bombing was the single worst terrorist incident in the Western Hemisphere until 11 September 2001, but unlike the latter event, there have been no trial or convictions to give closure to the victims' families.

To gain a better understanding of why the AMIA building was hit we need to go back to 14 August 1993 and an important meeting of the Special Action Committee (SAC) in the Iranian city of Mashhad. As we saw in a previous chapter, this committee was a decision-making body for Iran's most sensitive covert operations. The members present that day reportedly included Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, President Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati, and Minister of Intelligence and Security Ali Fallahian. Two non-SAC members were also present in advisory capacities: Mohsen Rabbani and Ahmed Reza Asghari, the third secretary at the Iranian embassy in Argentina and a probable Revolutionary Guards operative.[26]

The participants evaluated a plan developed by another secretive body, the Intelligence and National Security Committee (mentioned in chapter 4), to target an Israeli interest in Argentina—the AMIA building. One important player in this latter committee was the IRGC Qods Force commander, Brigadier Ahmed Vahidi. The SAC participants green-lighted the AMIA attack and delegated its execution to Imad Mughniyah.[27] The

planning and execution of the AMIA operation mimicked the 1992 embassy bombing in important respects, such as the selection of a Jewish or Israeli target, the use of a suicide bomber and a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (IED), exploitation of Hezbollah's Tri-Border Area base, and designation of Islamic Jihad as action agent. Funding reportedly came from one of Ali Khamenei's special Swiss bank accounts.[28]

The Argentine federal prosecutor Alberto Nisman was later able to reconstruct the key events leading up to the AMIA attack, including the meeting in Mashhad. On 1 July 1994 a team of probable MOIS personnel arrived at Buenos Aires' Ezeiza International Airport. That same team departed Buenos Aires on the day of the attack. For its part, Islamic Jihad recruited a twenty-one-year-old Lebanese suicide bomber, Ibrahim Hussein Berro, who flew to Asunción, Paraguay, with a Hezbollah handler on stolen European passports. In Paraguay they were met by a local Hezbollah man, Samuel Salman El Reda, who had been converted to Islam by Mohsen Rabbani some years before. Nisman assessed that it was El Reda's job to coordinate the arrival and departure of Hezbollah members involved in the attack and that he may also have obtained the explosives, which reportedly came from Colombian drug traffickers.[29]

Once again Mohsen Rabbani served as Iran's point man. At this point he had been living in Argentina for nearly twelve years, had acquired diplomatic accreditation, and was under periodic SIDE surveillance. Nisman's investigation concluded that it was most likely Rabbani who purchased the Renault Trafic commercial van used in the AMIA bombing. By 15 July 1994, three days before the attack, the van was parked in a car lot scarcely four hundred meters from the AMIA building, at 633 Calle Pasteur. Hezbollah experts had already loaded the van with some three hundred kilograms of explosives, including ammonium nitrate, aluminum, TNT, and nitroglycerine.[30] The bombing took place on a Monday morning, just as the morning rush hour was winding down. The massive explosion, both heard and felt blocks away, all but leveled the building. A total of eightyfive people were killed, of whom sixty-seven were inside when the bomb exploded. Hundreds more were wounded.[31]

The following day at around 4:30 in the afternoon a small Panamanian airliner, Alas Chiricanas flight 901 to Colon City, exploded in midair. Twenty-one were killed in that incident, and twelve of those happened to be

Jewish. A subsequent investigation concluded that a bomb had probably exploded near a seat occupied by a Lebanese national, Ali Hawla Jamal, whose false passports were found among the wreckage.[32] On 23 July 1994, a Beirut newspaper published a communique from a group called Ansar Allah (Helpers of God, one of Hezbollah cover identities) that claimed responsibility for both attacks.[33]

Both American and Israeli investigative teams assisted their Argentine counterparts, and once again it was the Israelis who discovered the telltale engine block and vehicle identification number (a point that gave rise to conspiracy theories alleging the planting of evidence). The VIN enabled experts not only to identify the type of vehicle used but also establish a chain of custody (although that too would later be disputed and marred by scandal).[34]

CONTROVERSIES

Argentina's investigative and judicial performance after the AMIA bombing has led many to conclude that the country's security agencies were either woefully negligent (at best) or participants in multiple cover-ups (at worst). The site itself was not secured until nearly three hours after the bombing; by that time hundreds of journalists and bystanders had poked in the rubble searching for survivors. Debris from the destroyed building was dumped at an open-air site where it was subject to looting. Later, judiciary investigators determined that sixty-six SIDE cassettes of intercepted communications had mysteriously vanished and could not be accounted for. It wasn't until three years later that a U.S. FBI team found flesh and other fragments that identified the bomber as Ibrahim Hussein Berro.[35]

Above all else, the AMIA case exposed fundamental deficiencies in Argentina's judicial system. As of 2021, nearly a quarter century later, the affair was still reverberating in Argentine politics, the longest-running case in that country's history, but no arrests had been made. The first judge was impeached for bribing a defendant, and in 2005 a new judge started proceedings from scratch.[36] Also assigned to the case was a young, ambitious, and combative prosecutor, Alberto Nisman, who painstakingly gathered evidence, including recordings of thousands of phone calls made at the Iranian embassy in Buenos Aires, the al-Tawhid Mosque, Beirut, and

the Tri-Border Area. Nisman and his associates meticulously documented an unusual number of Iranian officials entering and leaving Argentina in the lead-up to the bombing.[37] Nisman's labors paid off in 2006 with the release of an 801-page indictment of the government of Iran. It summarizes the case as follows: "The decision to carry out the attack was made not by a small splinter group of extremist Islamic officials, but was instead a decision that was extensively discussed and was ultimately adopted by *a consensus of the highest representatives of the Iranian government* at the time within the context of a foreign policy that was quite willing to resort to violence in order to achieve the goals that are inherent to the Islamic republic."[38]

On the basis of Nisman's report, Interpol issued "red notices," international alerts to police of wanted fugitives, on 15 March 2007 for five Iranian government officials and Hezbollah's Imad Mughniyah. The Iranians named by Interpol were Ali Fallahian, Mohsen Rezai (former IRGC commander), Ahmed Vahidi (no longer commander of the Qods Force), Ahmed Reza Asghari, and Mohsen Rabbani. None was arrested or extradited to Argentina.

In the years that followed Alberto Nisman was murdered, a cover-up of that murder was attempted, and the SIDE was dissolved by presidential decree, but the real culprits in the AMIA attack have gone unpunished.[39] The Islamic Republic of Iran, in staging two terrorist attacks in a country located on the other side of the world, had taken a carefully calculated risk and had won. Tehran demonstrated for the first time—and at little economic or political cost—its ability to conduct a mass-casualty, plausibly deniable attack. The next target would be much closer to home: Saudi Arabia.

7

The Khobar Towers Bombing

It was ten o'clock in the evening on 25 June 1996 when SSgt. Alfred R. Guerrero began inspecting guard posts on the roof of Building 131 at the Khobar Towers complex near Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. The building housed U.S. Air Force personnel responsible for maintaining a no-fly zone over southern Iraq. On this particular night, a typically hot and humid one on Saudi Arabia's Persian Gulf coast, Sergeant Guerrero spotted something unusual: a vehicle that looked like a sewage truck was being parked in a vacant lot some eighty feet from Building 131. Things got stranger still when two men jumped out and ran to a nearby Chevrolet Caprice. As the Caprice drove away into the night Guerrero ordered the immediate evacuation of the building.[1]

Unfortunately, Sergeant Guerrero and his team ran out of time. Approximately four minutes later the truck exploded with an estimated force of 20,000 tons of TNT. Nineteen American airmen were killed and more than 350 wounded. The entire side of Building 131 was stripped away and a crater sixteen feet deep dug out in front of it. In the pre-9/11 era, when Osama Bin Laden was still unknown to the American public, there was only one organization capable of planning and executing an attack like this: the "A Team" of transnational terrorism, Hezbollah's Islamic Jihad Organization.[2]

The attack was clearly aimed at the United States, though it was staged on Saudi soil. Still, given the poor state of Iranian-Saudi relations, Tehran must have relished giving its neighbor and rival a black eye at the same time. Indeed, their relations had long been plagued by mutual suspicion and outright animosity. One constant irritant was sectarianism: the modern

Saudi state had been founded by a puritanical Muslim sect many of whose members regarded the Shia as heretics to be converted, exiled, or killed.[3]

ATTACKING MONARCHIES

Iran's 1979 revolution had galvanized the Gulf Arab Shia. Having overthrown one monarch, Ayatollah Khomeini made it clear he wanted to get rid of others as well. In the early years of the Islamic Republic he reveled in denouncing the Arab monarchies and urging their subjects to rise up against them. Some disaffected Gulf Arab Shia were clearly inspired by Khomeini's call to arms. Bahrain, for example, possessed a Shia majority, though it was ruled by a Sunni royal family. Perhaps a third of all Kuwaitis were Shia, as were up to 15 percent of Saudi citizens.[4]

We have already examined how the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps was formally vested with the duty of exporting Iran's Islamic Revolution. The IRGC's Office of World Islamic Liberation Movements, a forerunner of the Qods Force, supervised and supported several Islamic activist groups on Iranian soil. One of these was the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in the World, run by two brothers, Mohammed Taqi al-Mudarissi and Hadi al-Mudarissi. Both were Shia clerics and native Arabic speakers.[5] The Mudarassi brothers' movement included the Organization of the Islamic Revolution in the Arabian Peninsula, the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain, and the Islamic Dawa Party. Each maintained a Tehran headquarters and enjoyed periodic access to Iranian government radio facilities, which they used to broadcast incendiary propaganda into the Arabian Gulf states. Some of these groups also possessed armed wings whose members trained at IRGC camps and occasionally fought alongside the guards against Iraq.[6]

The subversion of the Gulf Arab states provides early examples of how the IRGC used plausibly deniable cutouts to wage covert warfare (see figure 3). In 1981, for instance, the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB) staged an unsuccessful coup attempt against its government. Bahraini investigators uncovered evidence that the IFLB was directed by Tehran-based Hadi al-Mudarassi. Later the IFLB's subordination to the previously unknown Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in the World and through it to a shadowy Iranian Office of

World Islamic Liberation Movements became clear. Only much later would the IRGC's ultimate role as financier, trainer, planner, and facilitator of the 1981 coup attempt be established.[7] The Bahraini authorities were quick to point fingers at Iran but offered little public evidence to substantiate their accusations. As the Bahraini information minister told a press conference at the time, "Tehran denies it sponsored the plot, then its radio beams propaganda … telling people to rise up and how to make petrol bombs. Who are they trying to fool?"[8]

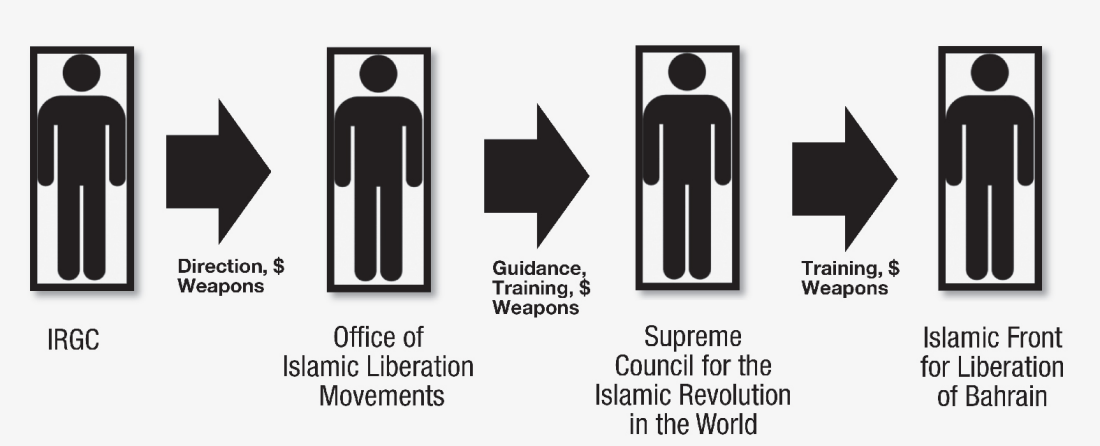

FIGURE 3. Iranian Cutouts for 1981 Bahrain Coup Plot

Iran also tried to incite the Saudi Shia against their government. In November 1979 and February 1980 Shia protesters challenged Saudi rule in the Eastern Province. When Riyadh ordered a ban on Ashura observances (a Shia holy day commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hussein), 90,000 took to the streets of several cities in defiance. The Saudi Arabian National Guard was then sent in to suppress the protests, and several protesters were killed in the ensuing melee.[9] In the midst of this unrest the Tehran-based Office of the Islamic Revolution in the Arabian Peninsula broadcast a stream of denunciations like the following:

> When the people have self-confidence and high morale, they will begin to demand their rights and oppose the authorities' policy and conduct. Indeed, it is this that the corrupt monarchies fear most. This is why they always attempt to trample upon the people's dignity and morale, oppress them and subject them to ignominy in

> order to prevent the people from ever contemplating opposition and confrontations. This is the nature of monarchy, which is rejected by Islam. This is what our people in the Arabian Peninsula are suffering under al-Saud's rule.[10]

Another avenue for Iranian subversion in Saudi Arabia was the Hajj pilgrimage season, when millions (in ordinary circumstances) flock to Mecca and Medina from around the world. The Iranian government infiltrated into the kingdom agents in the guise of pilgrims but in fact promoting the Iranian revolution and sowing anti-Saudi dissent.[11] They did so even as Ayatollah Montazeri announced their goals publicly: "During the Hajj ceremonies, Iranian pilgrims ought to inform the oppressed nations of the secret of the victory of the Islamic revolution in Iran. By exporting the revolution, we mean putting the experiences and fruits of our revolution at the disposal of the oppressed and the deprived peoples of the world."[12]

After Iraq invaded Iran in 1980, the Gulf Arabs' financial and diplomatic backing of Saddam Hussein became another bone of contention. When in 1982 Iranian forces invaded Iraq, the Gulf Arab states in general—and Kuwait in particular—rallied to Baghdad's aid, generating more animosity in Tehran. Using Montazeri's office as its primary proxy (and cutout) the IRGC sponsored subversion against Kuwait and Saudi Arabia to pressure them to stop aiding Iraq. It had several Saudi and Kuwaiti diplomats assassinated overseas, while Iranian-backed Shia parties and underground movements stepped up dissent against the two regimes.[13]

Kuwait was especially vulnerable, given its proximity to the Iran-Iraq War and its large Shia minority. The Revolutionary Guards' preferred proxies in Kuwait during the 1980s were the pan-Islamic Dawa Party and Imad Mughniyah's Islamic Jihad Organization. On 12 December 1983 a series of bombings took place across Kuwait City, killing five and wounding more than eighty. Among the targets were the American and French embassies. In the ensuing investigation, seventeen members of the Islamic Dawa Party, including Imad Mughniyah's brother-in-law Mustafa Badr al-Din, were arrested and put on trial.[14] The prosecution of the "Dawa 17" had consequences beyond Kuwait's borders, for Mughniyah began kidnapping Westerners in Lebanon and hijacking Kuwait Airways jets and had an assassination attempt made against the Kuwaiti emir. After each

action IJO reiterated its demand that the Dawa 17 be freed, but the Kuwaiti authorities refused.[15]

SAUDI HEZBOLLAH

The Iranian government viewed Hezbollah, with its IJO affiliate, as a loyal and lethal proxy. On the other hand, the various Gulf Arab Shia groups proved disappointing: the Iranian goals of curtailing Arab support for Iraq and expelling the United States from the region were not accomplished. Moreover, the Arab monarchies' internal-security services were effective in suppressing local chapters of the Islamic Dawa Party and the IFLB and the Organization of the Islamic Revolution in the Arabian Peninsula as well.[16] Something new was needed.

At some point in the mid-1980s, Iran's covert-action planners made a conscious decision to use Hezbollah as a model for new groups in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain. There were certain advantages to the Hezbollah approach, such as organization, discipline, hierarchy, operational security, and ideally greater Iranian influence and control.[17] Consequently Saudi Hezbollah, also known as Hezbollah al-Hejaz, was created in 1987 with these advantages in mind. Like the Lebanese organization, Saudi Hezbollah contained both political and military wings, and its fighters too were trained at a special camp in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley. The Iranians provided funding, weapons, and forged passports.[18]

Similar Hezbollah units for Bahrain and Kuwait were created and trained by the IRGC in Lebanon. They too were given the task of altering the policies of their respective governments toward their own Shia populations and also Iraq. Their Saudi and Lebanese cousins, however, were to be more successful.

When the Qods Force was created in early 1990 it absorbed the existing Revolutionary Guards Intelligence Department's infrastructure for Gulf Arab affairs. Qods Force Department 6000, led by Col. Ahmed Sharifi, handled covert operations in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, and the other Arabian Peninsula states, with responsibility for the various Gulf Hezbollah movements.[19] The Qods Force was still in its formative stage when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in August 1990. In an ironic demonstration of the law of unintended consequences, Iraqi forces opened up the Kuwaiti prisons

and thus set free the Dawa 17 captives, most of whom fled for Iran. Their liberation facilitated the release of the last Western hostages held by Hezbollah in Lebanon.[20]

The outcome of the combined American and allied effort to liberate Kuwait in 1991 was viewed by Iran with trepidation. On the one hand, Saddam's offensive military power had been crippled, but on the other, the Desert Storm operation had revealed glaring weaknesses in Iraq's doctrine and military hardware. Iran had adopted some of that doctrine and operated many of those weapons systems, all of which had now failed in the face of American power. But above all else, the 1990–91 war resulted in an extended U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf, which was viewed by the Iranians as a threat. When these forces began to settle in for the long haul at bases throughout the Arabian Peninsula, the Qods Force kept tabs on them and prepared terrorist contingency plans. For example, in 1993, Department 6000's Ahmed Sharifi ordered Saudi Hezbollah to spy on designated American diplomatic and military facilities in Saudi Arabia. One of them was the Khobar Towers apartment complex in Dhahran.[21]

KHOBAR TOWERS

Unlike the Buenos Aires bombings, the Khobar Towers attack had no cause that was easily identifiable for analysts. Instead, there seemed to be a slew of them, from U.S.-sponsored regional peace initiatives that would have isolated Iran diplomatically to a new round of American economic sanctions that hampered Tehran's efforts to modernize its oil and gas industry. Other events that may have triggered Tehran's decision included American-led military exercises in the Gulf region that included simulated assaults on islands. Tehran interpreted these as preparations to expel Iranian forces from the disputed islands of Abu Musa and Tonbs in the lower Gulf and built up its forces there as a result. Finally, in autumn 1995 there was a noticeable increase in regime-change rhetoric coming from a newly emboldened Republican-dominated House of Representatives in Washington.[22]

By mid-1995 the Qods Force and Saudi Hezbollah had selected Khobar Towers as the target for Iran's response to American pressure. The operation most likely was handled out of Iran's embassy in Damascus,

Syria being a friendly counterintelligence environment. In a foreshadowing of what was to take place twenty years later, Qods Force officers met their Saudi Hezbollah counterparts at the Seyida Zeinab shrine in Damascus, which was a pilgrimage site for Shia Muslims across the region. Both the Qods Force and Saudi Hezbollah used the shrine to recruit Saudi Shia pilgrims for the Khobar Towers project. After identification and vetting, recruits were sent across the border to the Bekaa Valley for training by Hezbollah and Qods Force specialists. For its part, the Iranian embassy in Damascus provided the stolen or forged passports and other forms of identification that enabled the hit team to transit the Jordanian and Saudi borders.[23]

The first attempt by Saudi Hezbollah to smuggle explosives into Saudi Arabia failed when a bomb-sniffing dog on the border with Jordan detected them. The driver of the vehicle was interrogated and confessed that he was from Lebanon. He also surrendered the names of three accomplices, whom Saudi security forces apprehended in April 1996. Saudi Arabia never informed the United States about these arrests, even though one of the detainees had confessed that Khobar Towers was one of the intended targets.[24] The leader of Saudi Hezbollah, Ahmed al-Mughassil, did not let this failure deter him, and eventually his organization managed to smuggle explosives into Saudi Arabia. These were subsequently loaded onto a sewage truck at a farm near Qatif.[25]

On 25 June 1996, at about ten in the morning local time, a Datsun sedan moved into a vacant lot adjacent to the fenced perimeter of Building 131. The car flashed its headlights, the all-clear signal for the Chevrolet getaway car to enter the area, followed by the sewage truck. The ensuing explosion was heard in Bahrain, nearly twenty miles away.[26] Then FBI director, Louis Freeh, left a description of the bomb site: “The scene itself was staggering. The broad crater where the truck had exploded had a slick of mud-colored water across its bottom. Beyond, Building 131 looked as if some giant had ripped the front off. The crime scene was littered with hairbrushes, photo frames, pieces of clothing—objects blown out of barracks rooms that no longer were surrounded by four walls.”[27]

AFTERMATH

For the Saudi government, the bombing was a catastrophe on multiple levels. First of all it exposed an embarrassing gap in the kingdom's defenses. Second, it projected an unwanted spotlight on sectarian discontent brewing in Saudi Arabia's oil-rich Eastern Province. Finally, Riyadh was uncertain of the American response if it came to light that, as suspected, Iran had a hand in the matter: might the Americans launch a war against Iran, with potentially destabilizing consequences for Saudi Arabia?[28] The Saudis ended up stonewalling the FBI investigation by denying Americans access to key suspects. Meanwhile, Riyadh notified Tehran that it would not allow the United States to attack Iran from Saudi Arabia if the Iranians agreed to stop sponsoring terrorism on Saudi soil.[29] For American investigators Saudi obstructionism was one obstacle. The rigorous communications-security procedures and counterintelligence practices of Islamic Jihad, Saudi Hezbollah, and the Qods Force presented another set of them.[30]

Nevertheless, a significant breakthrough, the first, in the Khobar case came in March 1997, when Hani Abdel Rahim al-Sayegh was arrested in Canada. Al-Sayegh told the Canadians that he was a member of Saudi Hezbollah and had been recruited by Qods Force Department 6000 chief, Ahmed al-Sharifi, for the Khobar Towers mission. In fact, al-Sayegh claimed he had driven the Datsun scout car on the night of 25 June 1996 to determine if the coast was clear for the bomb truck.[31] Al-Sayegh was extradited to the United States after apparently agreeing to testify in return for a plea bargain. But if he had so agreed he now reneged, so the U.S. government deported al-Sayegh to his native Saudi Arabia. Once again the Khobar Towers case had run up against a wall, and the Iran-IJO connection to it remained as elusive as ever (see figure 4).[32]

The next breakthrough came only in 1999, when the Saudis finally granted Washington access to detainees linked to the case. It was after questioning these individuals and cross-checking their testimony with information from other sources that the FBI was finally able to put together a case against Iran and Hezbollah. At that point President Bill Clinton asked the sultan of Oman to pass the following message to his Iranian counterpart, Mohammed Khatami:

> The United States Government has received credible evidence that members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), along with members of Lebanese and Saudi Hizballah, were directly involved in the planning and execution of the terrorist bombing in Saudi Arabia of the Khobar Towers military residential complex on June 25, 1996. [W]e need a clear commitment from you that you will ensure an end to Iranian involvement in terrorist activity, particularly threats to American citizens, and will bring those in Iran responsible for the bombing to justice either in Iran or by extraditing them to Saudi Arabia.[33]

President Khatami later told the BBC that he had viewed Clinton's message as a "threat" and denied Iranian responsibility for Khobar Towers.[34] But then, the president of Iran had no constitutional authority over the Revolutionary Guards—and in any case, Khatami was not president at the time of the attack.[35]R

The IRGC's decades-long campaign against the Gulf Arab monarchies yielded few positive results for Iran. The United States did not withdraw its forces from the region but, rather, augmented them, in response to the perceived threats posed by both Iraq and Iran. As of 2021, no Gulf Arab monarchy has been overthrown. Instead, Iranian belligerence forced the Gulf states together in a loose coalition, the Gulf Cooperation Council, whose founding raison d'être was, in fact, the Islamic Republic of Iran.

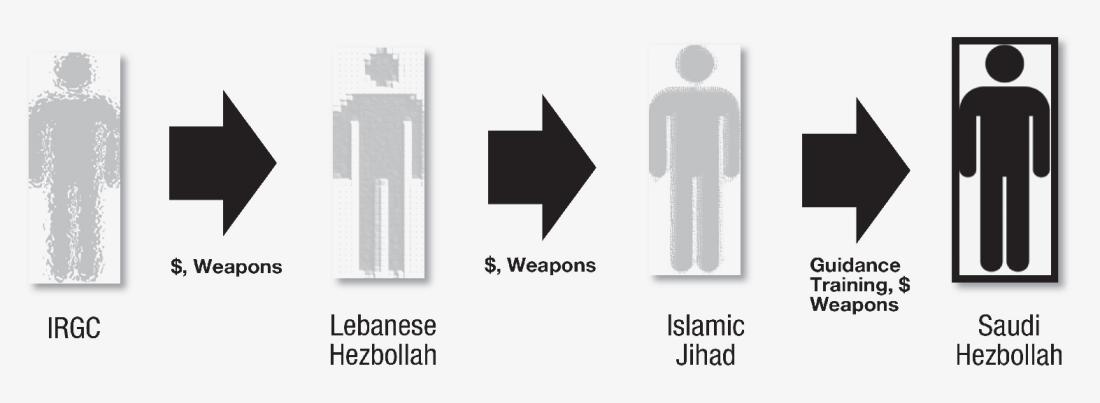

FIGURE 4. Iranian Cutouts for Khobar Towers Operation

As for Washington, it never retaliated against Iran for the Khobar Towers attack. This omission was owing in part to a lack of immediate, "smoking gun" evidence that could justify military retaliation against Iran.[36] At the same time, there were those in the American government who counseled against a military response, which might have undercut the legitimacy of President Khatami (whom Washington regarded with relative and guarded hopefulness) and jeopardized any U.S.-Iran rapprochement.[37] Louis Freeh has suggested yet another reason: "We understood, too, what an ugly can of worms we would be opening, in Washington and Riyadh, if we could show that senior Iranian officials had been behind the Khobar attack."[38] By 1999, when better evidence of Iran's role had become available, the original impetus for military retaliation had been blunted by time and other events. A new adversary had emerged in the Middle East and was beginning to attack American interests there and around the world. It was called al-Qaeda, and by the late 1990s it was operating from bases in Iran's eastern neighbor, Afghanistan.

PART II

Afghanistan and al-Qaeda

8

The Qods Force in Afghanistan

The flights had become almost routine by the late 1990s. Every week or so a Russian-made An-72 Coaler cargo plane would depart Mashhad in eastern Iran for one of a set of airfields in the former Soviet republic of Tajikistan. On landing in Dushanbe or Kulyab, the aircraft would unload pallets of weapons, ammunition, fuel, and food before returning empty to Mashhad. Soon after, rickety old Mi-8 Hip helicopters operated by the anti-Taliban resistance, the United National Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan, otherwise known as the "Northern Alliance," would ferry the cargoes into northern Afghanistan. These weekly arms shipments constituted the Qods Force's largest operation in the 1990s, although one that received little attention in the international press. Ironically, Iran's sustainment of the anti-Taliban resistance served American national interests too, since it kept the Northern Alliance alive long enough to serve as Washington's primary means of ousting the Taliban in late 2001.

TROUBLED NEIGHBOR

Mountainous, landlocked Afghanistan dominates Iran's eastern frontier. On a map the border cuts a poetic sweep across a vast, lightly populated region of deserts, salt lakes, mountains, and dried-up rivers. Like other lines on maps in this part of the world, the Afghan-Iranian border is very recent in origin and reflects the fantasies of nineteenth-century British imperialists. The border lines look deceptively definitive—on paper. Yet for millennia of human existence there were no lines at all.

By the late twentieth century, Afghanistan had become an unfortunate byword for political instability. In 1973 the Afghan king had been overthrown by his cousin in a bloodless coup followed by the proclamation of a republic. In April 1978 a communist-inspired coup ushered in a new regime that tried imposing secular politics, socialism, national education, and rural land reform on a deeply conservative society. The result of this quixotic attempt at revolution from above was that various parts of Afghanistan went into revolt, one of them a vast, isolated region in the center of the country called the Hazarajat. The Hazarajat had long been one of the poorest and least developed parts of generally impoverished and isolated Afghanistan. It also happened to be the home of the Hazaras, an ethnic and religious minority who constituted between 10 and 20 percent of Afghanistan's pre-1978 population. Then, as now, the Hazaras were subject to systematic discrimination on the basis of a supposed physical resemblance to Mongolians and their Shia faith.[1]

Given this legacy of poverty and discrimination, it is not surprising that supporters of Ayatollah Khomeini saw great potential in the Hazarajat for the export of their revolution. Yet when it came to ordering Iran's foreign policy priorities in the 1980s, Afghanistan was always going to be subordinate to Iraq, Lebanon, and the Persian Gulf. When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in December 1979, however, Tehran was forced to pay more than passing attention to its eastern neighbor.[2] Of course, the Soviet invasion did not alleviate Afghanistan's internal woes—it only aggravated them. Early Soviet counterinsurgency strategy focused on massed firepower by conventional forces against villages suspected of rebel sympathies. These crude tactics, combined with the unpopularity of the Afghan government's policies, generated a massive exodus into Pakistan and Iran. As the stream of refugees turned into a flood in 1980 and 1981 the Islamic Republic began providing them with shelter, food, and cooking fuel.[3]

IRANIAN GOALS

Iranian goals were limited throughout the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Tehran never espoused the breakup of the Afghan state.[4] To the contrary, the Iranians supported a strong central government in Kabul, provided it was not inimical to Iran. As the Soviet war dragged on and the Afghan

resistance, the Mojahedin (Soldiers of God), refused to surrender, the Iranians grew increasingly concerned about American, Pakistani, and Saudi influence in the region.[5]

The sheer number of Iranian government players complicated any attempt at a coordinated strategy toward Afghanistan. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs rarely enjoyed the luxury of shaping Tehran's policy; it had to share the Afghan portfolio with the Interior Ministry (because of the refugees), SAVAMA (chapter 2), and the IRGC.[6] Ayatollah Montazeri's Office of World Islamic Liberation Movements also had a place at the table. Until it was disbanded in the early 1980s the office, as it did with Islamic liberation movements in Iraq and the Persian Gulf, created and supported an umbrella organization, in this case the Islamic Revolution in Afghanistan.[7]

Also operating under the mantle of the Liberation Movements Office were two Shia Hazara parties. The first, Sazman-e Nasr-ye Islami-ye Afghanistan (Islamic Victory Organization of Afghanistan), was created in Iran after the 1978 coup in Kabul, while the second, Goruh-e Pasdaran-e Jihad-e Islami (Group of Guardians of Islamic Jihad), urged the creation of a Khomeinist state in Afghanistan. In the spring of 1984, at the peak (such as it was) of their success and in (temporary) alliance, the two had between them seized roughly two-thirds of Bamiyan Province, where they set up a Khomeini-style government complete with neighborhood komitehs and Islamic courts.[8]

Covert Aid

A great deal is now known about how Pakistan worked with the United States and Saudi Arabia to train and arm the Afghan Mojahedin against the Soviets.[9] Iran, by contrast, received much less attention, yet numerous contemporary accounts indicate that the Iranians provided lethal aid to the Afghan resistance in the 1980s.[10] Still, the amounts supplied were limited, because of several factors. First, the war with Iraq was a constant drain on Iranian resources. Second, like the Pakistanis, the Iranians feared that too much aid to the guerrillas might trigger Soviet retaliation. Third, Iran's most important Afghan allies at the time were located in central Afghanistan, far from the Iranian border. Between Iran and the Hazarajat lay resistance

forces belonging to a powerful warlord named Ismail Khan. At times IRGC deals with him allowed a limited supply of arms and ammunition to reach Hazara rebels in Ghowr. When Ismail Khan's fees were deemed exorbitant, the Iranians funneled aid to his enemies instead.[11]

Not all Afghans trained by Iran in the 1980s fought against the Afghan communists and their Soviet backers—at least not at first. Some served alongside the IRGC in successive campaigns against Iraq, where they gained combat experience before proceeding to Afghanistan. The Afghan Shia Abuzar Brigade, for example, fought Saddam Hussein in northern Iraq, where its skills in mountain warfare and insurgency were put to good use. This pattern would be repeated thirty years later when a Qods Force–trained unit of Afghan Shia, the Fatemiyun Brigade, fought against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.[12]

In April 1988, the Soviets began their phased withdrawal from Afghanistan. Iran's cease-fire with Iraq four months later enabled the IRGC to shift its focus to Afghanistan, where new prospects awaited. At the time, Iran's concerns centered on the possibility of victory in Kabul by pro-Pakistani (and Saudi) Mojahedin groups, several of which professed a militantly anti-Shia line. As a result, Tehran forged closer ties with the Afghan communist leader, Najibullah, who was searching for new allies after the Soviet pullout. The IRGC urged its Afghan Hazara allies to negotiate with Najibullah and sweetened the offer with increased arms shipments.[13] Two years after the last Soviet troops left Afghanistan Najibullah, defying the odds, was still clinging to power in Kabul. In 1991, he concluded a deal with Tehran under which the Iranians supplied fuel to western Afghanistan in return for the right to fly IRGC transport aircraft directly into Bamiyan to arm the Hazaras.[14]

Department 4000

When the Qods Force was created in 1990, the IRGC put the covertaction program in Afghanistan under its control. The IRGC's campaign in Afghanistan had been led by an element known as the Ansar Corps, which now retained its name but folded into the Qods Force as Department 4000. Its first commander was a rising star named Ismail Qaani. Born in Bojnord

near the border with Soviet Turkmenistan and a veteran of the Iran-Iraq War, Qaani commanded the IRGC's 5th Nasr Division before moving onto his new assignment with the Qods Force. This was to be an important milestone in Qaani's career: in January 2020 he was to take over as Qods Force commander when Qassem Soleimani was killed in Baghdad.[15]

The headquarters of the Ansar Corps was at the IRGC's Mashhad garrison. Throughout the remainder of the 1990s, additional training and administrative bases subordinated to the Ansar were established in towns close to the border with Afghanistan, including Tayebat, Birjand, Zabol, Zahedan, and Mirjaveh. As of 2020 that same infrastructure still supported Qods Force operations in Afghanistan, including aid for the Afghan Taliban.[16] In the aftermath of the Taliban's stunning return to power in 2021, Iranian policy was in a state of flux. On the one hand, Iran could not afford to ignore the new realities in Kabul. On the other, the Iranians were wary of perceived Pakistani gains and the potential for Taliban reprisals against Afghanistan's Hazara and Tajik populations.

The Ansar Corps expanded under Ismail Qaani, coincidently with a significant shift in Iranian policy toward Afghanistan. In addition to the agreement with the Afghan communists, Iran now applied money, weapons, and pressure to forge in 1989 a Hazara political front, the Hezb-e Wahdat (Party of Unity), announcing that all future aid for the Hazara Mojahedin would be funneled through Wahdat.[17]

Another, more subtle, change in Iran's approach was to emphasize Persian language and culture in its dealings with eastern neighbors. This somewhat undercut the revolutionary Islamic message that had been a staple of Iran's foreign policy for nearly a decade. The Persian-identity angle allowed the Iranians to establish new ties with Afghanistan's Tajik community, which although overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim speak an Afghan dialect of Persian called Dari. Historically forming the second-largest ethnic community in Afghanistan, the Tajiks rallied around a political party called the Jamiat-e Islami (Society of Islam). Jamiat also happened to command the loyalties of some of Afghanistan's most famous Mojahedin commanders, such as the aforementioned Ismail Khan and Ahmed Shah Masood.[18]

Iran's links to Jamiat seemed to pay dividends in 1992 when an Afghan coalition led by Masood and a former Afghan army commander, Abdul

Rashid Dostum, ousted Najibullah and planted a new government in Kabul. From the beginning the new regime was besieged by adversaries, for its installation had locked Pakistan's favorite Islamist proxies out of power. Another civil war ensued, and by 1993 Iranian transport planes were off-loading weapons and other supplies at Masood's air base at Bagram, north of Kabul.[19] The IRGC aid flights were not nearly enough to turn the tide of war in Masood's favor, for Afghanistan was already awash in weapons, and Pakistan had opened its American-supplied stockpiles to its favorite Afghan surrogates. The result was a veritable bloodbath, especially in the capital city, Kabul, which was nearly leveled by constant fighting between 1992 and 1995. The southern city of Kandahar suffered a similar fate at the hands of competing Pashtun warlords.

TALIBAN

Pakistan's aim was to export a puritanical Islamic ideology called Salafism. Until 1995 it was stymied by Afghanistan's volatile mixture of sectarian, ethnic, and tribal politics. By 1995, though, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate had discovered what it believed to be a winning horse in the Afghan sweepstakes. The group's name, the Taliban (religious students, in the sense of Islamic "seminarians"), had connotations of sanctity that some war-weary Afghans found appealing. From the beginning, though, the Taliban made it clear that their "Islamic" Afghanistan would not tolerate religious pluralism, including mystical practices or a "deviant" branch of the faith like Shiism.[20] The Taliban achieved some stunning successes in 1994–96, when its Pakistani-trained-and-equipped militia seized a number of Afghan cities: Kandahar, Herat, Jalalabad, and then Kabul itself. In 1997, Taliban forces drove north toward Mazar-e Sharif, the last major city still in rebel hands.

From the beginning the Taliban presented a thorny challenge for the Qods Force. On the one hand, the Taliban was a Sunni Islamist group with ties to Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf Arab countries. On the other, the Qods Force rarely let ideology get in the way of temporary alliances with groups inimical to the West. Still, some Taliban commanders were massacring Hazaras and Ismailis (another Shia sect). There was also the problem of Pakistan: the Iranians were increasingly suspicious that the

Taliban was a stalking horse for Pakistani, Saudi, and even American regional ambitions.[21] To make matters worse, Tehran learned in 1996 that the Taliban was aiding rebel groups who claimed to represent Iran's Turkmen and Baluchi minorities. The following year, the Taliban shuttered Iran's embassy in Kabul amid allegations that it was supporting dissidents.[22]

MAP 2. Afghanistan

Arms Shipments

Iran's response to growing tensions with the Taliban was to join an anti-Taliban alliance consisting of Russia, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and India, all of whom were alarmed by the Taliban and the extension of Pakistani-Saudi power into Central Asia.[23] At the same time, the Qods Force stepped up ground and air shipments to the Hezb-e Wahdat, Abdul Rashid Dostum's powerful Uzbek militia, and Ahmed Shah Masood.[24] Even Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who was notorious for outrages against Afghanistan's Shia in

the 1980s and early 1990s, was sheltered by the Qods Force after his 1996 defeat at the hands of the Taliban.[25]

When Taliban forces captured the western province of Badghis in 1996, Iran's overland link to the anti-Taliban resistance was cut. Consequently, over the next two years the IRGC used aircraft to ferry arms, ammunition, fuel, and food to airstrips in Bamiyan (which fell to the Taliban in September 1998), Bagram and Taloqan (which were repeatedly fought over), Dushanbe, and Kulyab. The latter two destinations were in Tajikistan and thus safer for transferring Iranian arms into northern Afghanistan.[26] The Taliban was certainly aware of these Iranian arms flights, but Kabul's diplomatic isolation was such that protests like the following fell on deaf ears: "Iranian planes in gross violation of all internationally accepted norms intrude our country's airspace to airlift supplies to airports controlled by the opposition. The grave consequences of such interference will rest with Iran which is the enemy of Islam. Afghanistan is capable of harboring opponents of the Iranian government inside Afghan territory and thus of creating problems for Iran."[27]

In August 1998, the Taliban captured Mazar-e Sharif, occupied the Iranian consulate there, and murdered eleven Iranian diplomats. Those killings (which later the Taliban tried to justify by alleging the diplomats had actually been intelligence officers) captured some international attention;[28] few, however, seemed to be aware that at the same time an estimated four thousand Hazara civilians were executed by Taliban death squads roaming the city. The massacres continued in Bamiyan, which fell in September 1998 to Taliban forces.[29]

War?

However indecisive the international reaction, the murder of the Iranian diplomats brought Iran and the Taliban to the brink of war. In September and October 1998 the Revolutionary Guards deployed an estimated 70,000 soldiers to the Afghan border, where they conducted a series of military exercises that kept the Taliban guessing about Iran's ultimate intentions.[30] At the same time, the Qods Force stepped up its covert aid shipments to the beleaguered anti-Taliban resistance. In the first six months of 1999 alone

there were thirty-three sorties by An72s and other aircraft from Mashhad to Tajikistan. The supplies they carried were then transferred to Northern Alliance Mi-8 Hips for shipment to Taloqan, Khwaja Bahauddin, and the Panjsher Valley.[31] A Qods Force colonel, Hassan Shateri (who also went by "Hessam Khoshnevis"), was sent to the Panjsher to gather intelligence on the Taliban and coordinate the flow of weapons, ammunition, fuel, food, cash, and training to the resistance. Nonetheless, by the summer of 2001 the Northern Alliance was a shoestring operation kept on life support by the IRGC. The Taliban had the rebels surrounded, and it seemed to be only a matter of time before the last resistance redoubt succumbed to Afghanistan's new masters.[32]

Between 1998, when it decided not to invade Afghanistan, and summer 2001, Iran's policy on Afghanistan was governed by the following considerations. First, weakening the Taliban was paramount, especially if the Taliban's policies toward Iran and its Afghan allies could be shifted. Tehran was equally wary of the Taliban's Pakistani and Saudi benefactors, because in the regional power struggle any Taliban gain would be seen by them as an automatic Iranian loss. Moreover, the Iranian leadership was firmly convinced that the U.S. government was pro-Taliban and welcomed Taliban victories in the name of a much-hoped-for stable Afghanistan.[33] All this pointed to an Iranian policy essentially defensive in nature. By propping up Ahmed Shah Masood's besieged resistance the Iranians were buying time, waiting for something to happen in their favor. Neither they nor the Americans could have predicted that this "something" would be the 11 September 2001 al-Qaeda terrorist attacks.[34]

9

The Qods Force and 9/11

On the eve of 11 September 2001 the Taliban was occupying approximately 90 percent of Afghanistan and, with the backing of Pakistani army advisers and foreign jihadis, was poised to conquer the remainder. Arrayed against its fighters were the scattered forces of the Northern Alliance led by its longtime commander, Ahmed Shah Masood.[1] Iran was the primary foreign backer of the Northern Alliance, and Qods Force had provided Masood arms, cash, intelligence, and military advice. As with most things Afghan, logistics was the biggest challenge confronting the resistance and its Iranian backers. The overland route from the Iranian border was cut off after the fall of Badghis Province to Taliban forces in 1998. The air resupply routes were becoming tenuous as well: the more territory the anti-Taliban resistance lost in northern Afghanistan, the more airfields it lost as well.[2]

By late summer 2001 the Qods Force liaison officer to the Northern Alliance might have been excused if his reports to headquarters were pessimistic. The anti-Taliban coalition had retreated to its last bastion, the tightly guarded Panjsher Valley north of Kabul. The only glue holding the alliance together was Masood, but even he had grown weary of his country's seemingly interminable conflicts.[3] On 9 September the end of the Northern Alliance seemed as if it might be at hand: Masood was assassinated by an al-Qaeda team posing as journalists. At first the alliance scrambled to keep Masood's death a secret lest it demoralize the frontline fighters.[4] For its part, the Qods Force advisory team learned about the assassination as soon as it happened; it offered to transfer Masood's body to a Mashhad morgue until the resistance was ready to announce his death. But events were moving too quickly for that.[5]

ZERO TRUST

On 11 September, four hijacked planes flying over a continent thousands of miles away changed the course of history in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the country that lay between them, Iran. In the aftermath of the tragedy in New York, Washington, DC, and Pennsylvania, some Iranians took to the streets, not to pillory the United States but to express sympathy for the victims and their families. The spectacle must have been jarring to Iranian leaders who had distinctly more hostile views of the United States.[6]

The irony was that up until 9/11 the most discernible element in U.S. policy toward Afghanistan had been avoiding the country altogether. The Soviets were long gone, the Afghan communist regime had been destroyed, and the Cold War was over. In the mid-1990s some Washington policy makers had even become convinced that a rapprochement with the Taliban would not only check Iranian power in the region but also enable American energy companies to build a gas pipeline across Afghanistan from Turkmenistan to Pakistan.[7] At best, U.S. policy toward Afghanistan was ambivalent. The CIA sent in small teams to the Panjsher to ferret out what Masood's people knew about al-Qaeda and deliver some signals-intelligence equipment. They even trained a young Masood associate, Amrullah Saleh, in intelligence collection and analysis. Altogether it was a minimal investment, but it would pay rich—and unexpected—dividends after 9/11.[8]

After 11 September the CIA used its contacts in the Northern Alliance to help shape the battlefield for American retaliation. The essential lubricant was millions of dollars in cash. which would buy the Northern Alliance time and more Afghan allies.[9] On the 26th a CIA team led by Gary Schroen, a veteran case officer, deployed to the Panjsher.[10] Schroen's priorities were locating the al-Qaeda leadership, assessing the capabilities of the Northern Alliance after Masood's death, collecting actionable intelligence on Taliban positions in Takhar Province toward the Tajik border and the Shomali Plain north of Kabul, and sustaining the resistance until U.S. forces arrived.[11]

The CIA knew about the Qods Force advisers embedded in the Northern Alliance and ordered Schroen to pass a message to them: "If they approach, or appear anywhere near the battlefield, we will view them as hostiles."[12] Later, Schroen's replacement, Gary Berntsen, used his own Northern

Alliance contacts to pass a similar message to the Qods Force. As Berntsen later wrote, “this horrified the Afghans. They didn’t want to get caught in the middle of a geopolitical feud.”[13] The anti-Taliban resistance *was* in a quandary: battling for its survival, the alliance found itself trapped between two powerful allies who had zero trust in each other. When the CIA wanted to establish observer posts overlooking the Shomali Plain, it asked the Northern Alliance to evict a two-man Qods Force team already there.[14] Although some CIA case officers may have overestimated American influence (“We knew the Iranians were scared shitless of us”), the Qods Force officers must have been only too happy to let the Americans take the lead against the Taliban.[15] If U.S. airpower could demolish Taliban positions in Shomali and enable Iran’s Afghan allies to recapture Kabul, then so much the better. As Khatami put it years later, during his presidency, in an interview with the BBC, “The Taliban was our enemy. America thought the Taliban was their enemy too. If they toppled the Taliban, it would serve the interests of Iran.”[16]

The CIA and the Qods Force strictly avoided each other in Afghanistan; however, in New York, Geneva, and Bonn, American and Iranian diplomats negotiated face to face after 9/11. In the weeks following the al-Qaeda attacks, Tehran’s and Washington’s interests were, as Khatami perceived, roughly aligned—for a while. Both sought to oust the Taliban, both now backed the Northern Alliance, both supported a process that would create an interim Afghan government, and both wanted a stable Afghanistan.[17] In the Bonn talks on Afghan governance, the Iranians convinced the Northern Alliance to accept a Pashtun, Hamid Karzai, as interim president.[18]

IRANIAN CONCERNS

But there were differences too, and these would become very significant over time. For example, the United States was determined to destroy al-Qaeda, whereas the Iranians were rather ambivalent about it. Washington was cautious about the Northern Alliance, which it viewed as insufficiently representative of all Afghans, while Tehran had no qualms about the Northern Alliance’s role in a new Afghan government.[19] Then there were the serious Iranian concerns about a long-term U.S. military presence in Afghanistan.

We can only speculate on the kinds of questions being asked in Tehran during the fall of 2001, but they probably ran along these lines: What is American policy toward Iran and Afghanistan? Who in Washington, DC, is most influential when it comes to policy on Iran? After all, until 9/11 many in the Iranian government had been firmly convinced America backed the Taliban. From Tehran's perspective, the State Department was saying the right things, speaking of the need to remove the Taliban, to create an inclusive Afghan government, and to include Iran in discussions on the future of Afghanistan. It was, rather, the Pentagon that aroused suspicions in Tehran. The Iranians must have been aware from the American press and diplomats that civilians from the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) wielded considerable influence over U.S. policy on Iran.[20] In addition, Tehran no doubt knew of a meeting that took place on 10 December 2001 in Rome between two OSD officials and the Iranian dissident (and alleged intelligence fabricator) Manuchehr Ghorbanifar. In that meeting Ghorbanifar had passed on "intelligence" of rising social unrest in Iran, a prospect that must have intrigued the Iran hawks in Washington. More alarmingly for Tehran, Ghorbanifar was also alleging that the Iranians had sent "hit teams" to Afghanistan with orders to target American personnel.[21] It's easy to see how the Iranians could be deeply suspicious of American intentions in light of the semiclandestine meetings with Ghorbanifar. Given the Iranian Intelligence Ministry's penetration of Iranian exiles in Europe, it is safe to assume that Tehran learned of the results of the 10 December meeting at the same time that the U.S. Defense Department did.[22]

THE MIRROR IMAGE

When we examine the American perspective on Iran in Afghanistan the parallels with the Iranians' own considerations are striking. The questions were very similar: What is Tehran's real (as opposed to declared) policy toward the United States? Who drives foreign policy in the Iranian government? The Iranians were bewildered by the multiplicity of players and interests involved in formulating American foreign policy; American national-security decision makers were equally mystified by Iranian governance.[23] An unclassified wall chart assembled by the CIA mapped out the formal Iranian decision process in all of its bewildering complexity. In

addition to a Council of Guardians, a Council for the "Discernment of the Expediency," and the Assembly of Experts, there was a Supreme Council for National Security that coordinated Iranian national-security policy. Beneath the SCNS were the individual players with foreign-policy equities such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security.[24]

Nothing symbolized the contradictoriness of Iranian foreign policy better than the Ministry of Foreign Affairs itself. On paper the MFA was the logical "go-to" source for American diplomats interested in Iran's perspectives on Afghanistan. American diplomats in New York, Geneva, and Bonn found their interlocutors, like Deputy Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif and Ambassador Mohammed Ibrahim Taherian, erudite and shrewd negotiators. It seemed clear that they were in the driver's seat, masters of Afghanistan's labyrinthine politics. The problem for American policy makers amounted to this: Could the Iranian Foreign Ministry deliver? Did it really speak on behalf of all the factions in Tehran? [25]

POWER AND POLICY IN IRAN

American intelligence professionals were cautious in answering these questions, which cut to the core of an ongoing analytical debate over power and policy in Iran. Many believed that the MFA did not in fact have much influence over policy toward Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, or the Palestinians. Moreover, as lessons learned from Iranian-sponsored terrorism operations elsewhere suggested, the SCNS was not an influential player either. Risky covert-action operations abroad were handled by tightly compartmented and secretive structures like the Special Action Committee (chapter 4), which now consisted of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the president, the minister of intelligence, and the minister of foreign affairs.[26]

The 1997 election of reformist Mohammed Khatami as president had injected a new set of variables into what was for Western observers an already complex equation. Some figures linked to previous acts of terrorism —Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati, Intelligence Minister Ali Fallahian, and IRGC commander Mohsen Rezai—were rotated out of their jobs. Did that mean that staffing in the highly sensitive covert-action committees had

changed? It was hard to imagine the hard-liners allowing either Mohammed Khatami or his foreign minister, Kamal Kharazi, to have a voice at that table. And what about Qassem Soleimani? He was a relatively new player in the rarefied heights of Iranian national-security decision-making. Did he or his Qods Force have a role in planning covert operations—and if so, what?

There was a broad consensus in the U.S. intelligence community that the Revolutionary Guards were a key institutional player in Afghanistan. The Qods Force was scarcely known outside of intelligence circles at the beginning of Washington's "war on terror," but American diplomats soon learned that the uniformed officers accompanying Iranian negotiating teams were Revolutionary Guards. These men tended to listen and observe more than speak, but they did exert influence at critical points in the talks. For example, the United States began air operations against Taliban targets on 7 October 2001, dropping tons of ordnance on terrorist training camps, caves, bunkers, and whatever constituted Taliban air defenses at the time. But Washington was reluctant to bomb entrenched Taliban positions north of Kabul. We know in retrospect that this reluctance was purposeful—Washington did not want to facilitate a Northern Alliance takeover of Kabul. For their part, the Iranians were frustrated by apparent U.S. inaction. During one meeting with American officials, the IRGC member handed over a map detailing Taliban military positions on the Shomali Plain—doubtless information collected by Qods Force operatives embedded in the Northern Alliance.[27]

As we have seen, the CIA knew of the Qods Force presence in northern Afghanistan. One of the Qods Force missions clearly was to advise and assist the anti-Taliban resistance. But some American analysts suspected its operatives had other, more nefarious objectives as well, such as collecting intelligence or sponsoring attacks on U.S. forces. As for the latter, Ghorbanifar's allegations added fuel to the suspicions of those who thought the worst of the Iranians.[28] In early November 2001, the CIA detected Iranian contacts with the Taliban even as the latter was being battered by U.S. airpower and opposition forces on the ground. Then the Americans picked up signs of official Iranian contacts with the beleaguered remnants of al-Qaeda as well.[29] U.S. troops in Afghanistan, primarily soldiers of the 5th Special Forces Group, were reporting aggressive Iranian surveillance of

their activities. Reports like these generated an official complaint to Iranian diplomats in Geneva.[30]

SOLEIMANI EMERGES

The end came quickly for the Taliban. The momentum swung sharply against it when U.S. airpower began striking Taliban formations on the Shomali Plain with precision-guided munitions. The Taliban fighters began melting away, and by 12 November Northern Alliance forces had entered Kabul. One Iranian diplomat told the American ambassador, Ryan Crocker, that "Hajji Qassem is very pleased with our cooperation."[31]

Qassem Soleimani had been the commander of the Qods Force for nearly three years when 9/11 shook his world. He had come to the job during a period of escalating tensions with the Taliban over the latter's policies toward Iran and the Afghan Shia. It is not clear whether or not Soleimani's promotion was inspired by the downturn in Taliban-Iranian relations, but we do know that he had previous experience in Afghanrelated matters. Prior to his 1998 appointment as Qods Force commander, Soleimani had supervised the IRGC's war on drug smugglers based in Afghanistan.

Still, for many American analysts, Soleimani remained something of a mystery, and the extent of his leverage over Iran's Afghanistan policy was poorly understood at first. Nor were Soleimani's personal opinions of the United States known, although one could assume they reflected the anti-American sentiment of the IRGC establishment.[32] Still, Soleimani had a pragmatic streak, as Hussein Moussavian, a senior official in the Iranian government during 9/11, explained later. Soleimani, he observed, "vocally supported" cooperation with the United States in Afghanistan as long as Iran's interests were accomplished in doing so.[33]

Clearly there were sharply defined limits beyond which neither Washington nor Tehran would go. Hawks on both sides were deeply suspicious, and the limited diplomatic dialogue was not going to last. Reports flowed in that Iranian officials were letting al-Qaeda leaders settle in Iran and aiding an anticoalition militia in the city of Herat.[34] The suspicions they engendered found their way into President George W. Bush's January 2002 State of the Union address: "Iran aggressively pursues

these weapons [of mass destruction] and exports terror while an unelected few repress the Iranian people's hopes for freedom. States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil."[35]

Needless to say, some of the Iranian diplomats who had been working closely with their American counterparts on Afghanistan were outraged by the president's speech. One even approached Ambassador Crocker in Kabul and told him bluntly, "Soleimani is in a tearing rage. He feels compromised."[36] Soleimani's response was not long in coming.

One pattern repeats itself in the warp and weft of Tehran's foreign policy–making: the enemy of my enemy is my friend, even if he may some day be my enemy. While some Western analysts of Iran were hamstrung by simplistic, binary analysis ("The Iranians are Shia, and the Taliban are Sunnis—ergo, they despise each other"), Tehran had always kept some Sunni jihadi aces up its sleeve. One was the Afghan warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. During the early 1990s this man was infamous as the prime minister who destroyed his own capital city. He was notorious also for his vehement dislike of Shia, many of whom fell victim to his brutal Hezb-e Islami militia in the 1980s and 1990s.[37] When the Taliban captured Kabul in 1996, Hekmatyar fled to Iran, where the Qods Force kept him on ice until Afghan circumstances changed.[38] In the early flush of victory over the Taliban in December 2001, Tehran offered to hand over Hekmatyar to interim president Hamid Karzai. This offer was declined.[39]

Hekmatyar's stock began to go up in Iranian eyes after the "axis of evil" speech. After all, the Qods Force possessed in him an Afghan mischief maker of the highest order, someone who could make life really miserable for the Americans and their allies in Afghanistan. Moreover, Hekmatyar was a useful intermediary in Iran's dealings with al-Qaeda. When senior al-Qaeda figures escaped to Iran after the fall of the Taliban's emirate, it was Hekmatyar who helped settle them, in eastern Iran.[40] In early February 2002, Hekmatyar publicly resurfaced in Pakistan. Given his reputation for cold-blooded ruthlessness, the warlord's return to his old stomping ground did not bode well for Karzai and his Western backers.[41]

10
Iran and al-Qaeda

The events of 11 September 2001 and their aftermath raised new questions about Iran's relations with al-Qaeda. On the one hand, there was a belief that since Iran was a Shiite state and al-Qaeda a Sunni jihadist outfit, it was highly unlikely that the two would ever find common cause. But others argued that the picture was more complicated than that, and as evidence they cited Iran's murky ties to Sunni extremists.

EGYPTIAN ISLAMIC JIHAD

Take Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) as a case in point. Heavily influenced by the Sunni fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood, the EIJ and its operatives were responsible for the 1981 assassination of President Anwar al-Sadat in Cairo. The organization was partially dismantled by the Egyptian security services following Sadat's murder, but its fortunes revived in Afghanistan, where several of its members fought the Soviets. By the late 1980s one branch of Jihad was led by Ayman al-Zawahiri, who was based in Pakistan and occasionally allied with another peripatetic jihadist, one Osama Bin Laden.[1]

In 1988, Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security provided financial support to Zawahiri's group, even as the Afghan jihad against the Soviet Union was winding down.[2] The MOIS' motives can only be guessed, since the details of the relationship are still obscure. The EIJ had declared war on the Egyptian government, at a time when Iranian-Egyptian relations had reached a new low because Sadat sheltered the last shah of Iran. Furious at Sadat's humanitarian gesture, the Iranians later renamed a street in Tehran

after Khaled al-Islambuli, one of the Egyptian president's killers. Then there was the Arab-Israeli peace process. As the first Arab state to make peace with Israel, Egypt was the bête noire of those who rejected its "sellout," including Ayatollah Khomeini. In fact, Iran played a spoiler role in Arab-Israeli peace talks throughout the 1990s by supporting rejectionist groups like Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—General Command.[3]

TURABI'S SUDAN

The EIJ moved to Khartoum in the early 1990s, where Ayman al-Zawahiri established contact with the first commander of the Qods Force, Brigadier Ahmed Vahidi. This relationship would prove very useful to the former after 9/11 when some al-Qaeda leaders fled to Iran.[4] But why Khartoum? Located in the heart of East Africa, far from the Middle East's war zones, Sudan was not the most logical site for meetings between the world's most prominent Sunni and Shia radical organizations. Yet a June 1989 coup by Sudanese army officers led by Brigadier Omar al-Bashir had been a turning point for modern Sudan: behind one of al-Bashir's most important domestic backers was the National Islamic Front (NIF).[5] A spin-off of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the NIF advocated the creation in Sudan of an Islamic state run on a strict interpretation of the sharia. The NIF's leader was the erudite, charismatic Islamic thinker Hassan al-Turabi, an éminence grise in al-Bashir's regime. It was Turabi who invited Islamists of all persuasions and doctrines to come to Khartoum and join in creating an Islamic order there.[6]

Among those who accepted Turabi's invitation were Osama Bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, members of another Egyptian jihadist outfit called the Islamic Group, as well as of the Palestinian Hamas and Lebanese Hezbollah. Much to the consternation of the Algerian government, Turabi and Bashir would even shelter that country's recently banned Islamic Salvation Front.[7] Islam was apparently the only thing that bound these disparate groups together. In addition to the broader issues of sect—Hezbollah was a militant Shia group, after all—many of these parties clashed over the finer points of *takfir* doctrine (that of Muslims declaring other Muslims apostates) and the "true" adversaries.[8] Turabi sometimes

found himself mediating between feuding organizations, and his calls to end Muslim sectarianism went unheard.[9]

Iran-Sudan relations improved considerably after a December 1991 visit to Khartoum by President Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, MOIS chief Ali Fallahian, and IRGC commander Mohsen Rezai.[10] Shortly after this visit, the first Qods Force team arrived in Khartoum, with the mission of running training camps for a government militia, the People's Defense Forces. This was a prestigious assignment for the Revolutionary Guards, and they appointed an up-and-coming colonel, Mohammed Baqr Zolqadr, to lead it.[11] The counterintelligence environment in Khartoum was friendly for Iranian spies, and they took advantage of this to renew contacts with Ayman al-Zawahiri and Egyptian Islamic Jihad. It was Zawahiri who introduced the Iranians to Mohammed Salah al-Din, another Egyptian colleague, who also went by his nom de guerre, Saif al-Adl (Sword of Justice).[12]

HEZBOLLAH AND AL-QAEDA

The Iranians undoubtedly helped bring Lebanese Hezbollah into talks with Zawahiri's people. In 1995 an al-Qaeda/EIJ delegation consisting of Saif al-Adl, Mahfouz Ould ibn al-Walid, and Abu Walid al-Masri was dispatched to Tehran to conclude a deal with the Iranian government.[13] According to testimony by Ali Abdelsoud Mohammed in his trial for his role in the 1998 bombings of two American embassies in East Africa, Hezbollah was a key part of those negotiations: "Hezbollah provided explosives training for al-Qaeda and al-Jihad. Iran supplied Egyptian Islamic Jihad with weapons. Iran also used Hezbollah to supply explosives that were disguised to look like rocks."[14]

Both Tehran and al-Qaeda gained from their secret deal. The Iranians obtained an al-Qaeda pledge to warn of its upcoming terrorist operations. For its part, al-Qaeda gained access to Hezbollah camps in the Bekaa Valley, where Bin Laden's people were trained in small arms, propaganda, and human-intelligence operations. Al-Qaeda would also be allowed to pass through Iran to and from Afghanistan, which was about to become the organization's new base.[15]

“ISSUES OF MUTUAL INTEREST”

In 1996 Saudi and American pressure compelled the Sudanese government to expel al-Qaeda, which then moved to Afghanistan. There it faced the formidable logistics challenges posed by a landlocked country with a war-damaged or nonexistent infrastructure. Al-Qaeda’s access to recruits and funds in the Arabian Peninsula depended on Pakistan or Iran; in the end the terrorist group relied primarily on the latter, since it was an inveterate adversary of the United States. It probably helped that EIJ, al-Qaeda’s inseparable ally, enjoyed close ties to Tehran.

Between 1997 and 2001 al-Qaeda and its affiliates shuttled recruits, funds, and operatives across Iranian territory, pursuant to the 1995 arrangement. It did so with the tacit acknowledgment of the Revolutionary Guards Qods Force and the MOIS. The veteran EIJ operative Saif al-Adl later wrote about Iran’s value as a link between al-Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan and the outside world: “This passage was new and important to us in al-Qaeda. We took advantage of it later on. We used it instead of the old route through Pakistan, particularly for the passage of Arab brothers. This issue prompted us to think of building good relations with some virtuous people in Iran to pave the way and coordinate regarding issues of mutual interest.”[16]

Over time, four nodes emerged in the al-Qaeda/Iranian network. Representing al-Qaeda was the aforementioned Saif al-Adl, who would become Osama Bin Laden’s designated liaison with the Qods Force. Imad Mughniyah, the veteran leader of Hezbollah’s Islamic Jihad Organization, had developed ties with a number of Arab jihadi groups, both Sunni and Shia. Ahmed Vahidi, the Qods Force commander from 1990 to 1998, was Tehran’s front man in most dealings with al-Qaeda. The fourth and final node was the Afghan warlord, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who was sheltered by Vahidi’s Qods Force after fleeing the Taliban in 1996. Hekmatyar’s Hezb-e Islami militia helped al-Qaeda fugitives settle in Iran after 9/11.[17]

END OF THE EMIRATE

When the Taliban sanctuary collapsed in November–December 2001, al-Qaeda had to find a new home fast. Realistically, there were only two possibilities, Pakistan or Iran. One group of al-Qaeda fugitives fled to the

mountain fastness of Tora Bora, which was not far from Afghanistan's border with Pakistan. When the United States and its local Afghan allies began focusing their energies on the Tora Bora cave complexes, the al-Qaeda leadership was forced to disperse. Some crossed into Pakistan but made their way to Iran, where they linked up with Ahmed Vahidi. Although he was no longer the Qods Force commander, Vahidi was still a known quantity to the Arab jihadists. According to one source, Ayman al-Zawahiri exploited his working relationship with Vahidi to arrange for Saif al-Adl's passage to Iran. In fact, Qods Force representatives helped arrange the exfiltration of Saif al-Adl and several of Osama Bin Laden's sons.[18]

A second group of al-Qaeda fugitives bypassed Tora Bora and fled to the Pakistani city of Quetta in December 2001. The leader of this group, Mahfouz Ould ibn al-Walid, took a bus from Quetta to the Iranian border, where he was met by representatives of Qods Force Department 4000. They drove al-Walid to a Qods Force base in Zahedan and questioned him about the whereabouts of the Taliban leaders Mullah Omar and Osama Bin Laden.[19] One of al-Walid's Qods Force interrogators sought to reassure him: "Look, don't worry so much. We have much in common, you and us, since we all believe in one God, one Prophet, one Book, and pray in the same direction."[20] The next day al-Walid was flown to Tehran, where he was put in a Qods Force safe house. According to two British journalists, Cathy Scott-Clark and Adrian Levy, al-Walid was informed that the Qods Force commander, Qassem Soleimani himself, had approved a deal whereby selected al-Qaeda would be granted safe haven in return for pledges not to attack Iran. Walid agreed to these conditions and arranged safe passage for the remainder of his group still in Quetta.[21]

Yet another group of Arab jihadis caught up in the collapse of the Taliban emirate was in Herat. Among them was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian jihadist loosely affiliated with al-Qaeda but running his own training camp in western Afghanistan. When Herat fell to anti-Taliban forces in December 2001, Zarqawi fled to Iran with the help of Hekmatyar's Hezb-e Islami. Zarqawi reportedly was admitted to a Mashhad hospital and treated for unspecified wounds received during the recent fighting.[22] At some point during his Mashhad sojourn Zarqawi established contact with the Qods Force, whose Ansar Corps was headquartered in that city. The Ansar Corps provided Zarqawi with the cell phones, travel

documents, and money necessary to consolidate surviving members of his organization inside Iran. Zarqawi then crossed Iran into Iraq and linked up with a Kurdish Sunni Islamist group, Ansar al-Islam. When Zarqawi was detained by Iran's MOIS in 2002, it was Qassem Soleimani who sprung him loose. A year later, Zarqawi launched his terror campaign in Iraq under al-Qaeda auspices.[23]

IRANIAN INCONSISTENCIES

As reports of al-Qaeda's interactions with Iran trickled in, analysts in Washington, London, and elsewhere scratched their heads in bewilderment: *What was Tehran's game?* After all, the images of Iranian candlelight vigils after 9/11, not to mention President Khatami's declaration that Iran would destroy Bin Laden's outfit, directly contradicted the new information.[24] Then there was the fact that MOIS had been arresting al-Qaeda members in Iran throughout 2002.[25] As a ministry in Khatami's government, MOIS nominally reported to the president; however, the position of MOIS chief was constantly disputed between Khatami and Supreme Leader Khamenei. It is widely believed that the then–MOIS minister, Ali Yunesi, was a "reformer."[26] Al-Qaeda members who interacted with MOIS found it hostile. As one MOIS officer told an al-Qaeda detainee, "You destroyed Afghanistan and you came here to destroy the Islamic Republic of Iran. We will not risk the future of more than seventy million Iranians for ants like you."[27] In the end, some of the al-Qaeda operatives detained by MOIS were freed when the Qods Force intervened on their behalf, but others were deported to Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, or Southeast Asia. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's fighters were usually transferred to Qods Force custody and then released to fight the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq.[28]

Inevitably, the topic of al-Qaeda entered diplomatic discussions between the United States and Iran in Geneva. As early as October 2001 the United States handed over a list of al-Qaeda names along with a CIA line-andblock chart of the terrorist organization's leadership. In response the Iranians insisted they were apprehending any al-Qaeda fugitives they could find and requested American assistance in rendering al-Qaeda captives to Saudi Arabia and Egypt.[29] Qassem Soleimani was not physically present on this

occasion, but his influence was made palpable by the Iranian negotiators' frequent references to "Hajji Qassem."[30]

By the time of the next meeting with Iranian representatives, in May 2003, the tenor had changed completely. Not only had George W. Bush's "axis of evil" speech complicated matters but in March 2003 the Americans had invaded Iraq. Once again the Americans pressed their Iranian counterparts to act against al-Qaeda fugitives on Iranian soil; the Americans were picking up signs linking Iran to an impending al-Qaeda attack in the Gulf region.[31] Iran's deputy foreign minister, Mohammed Javad Zarif, pushed back, declaring that American treatment of the Mojahedin-e Khalq opposition group would be reciprocated by Tehran when it came to al-Qaeda. But the Americans pressed: al-Qaeda detainees in Iran were plotting a "catastrophic attack" on the Arabian Peninsula, and if they were not thwarted Washington would hold Tehran responsible. The Iranian diplomats denied harboring any al-Qaeda: had not the Iranian Supreme Council for National Security declared al-Qaeda an "enemy of Iran"? Surely that was enough?[32]

What the Americans had warned of came to pass on 12 May 2003 when three truck bombs struck residential complexes in Riyadh, killing thirty-four, including eight Americans. In the immediate aftermath of the bombings, Iran's MOIS rounded up four al-Qaeda leaders, including Saif al-Adl; however, on 14 May, the Qods Force freed them.[33]

The known presence of senior al-Qaeda operatives on Iranian soil, combined with Iran's reluctance to crack down on them, led to Saudi diplomatic pressure on Tehran. A team led by the Saudi deputy interior minister flew to Tehran for meetings, bringing such evidence as cell phones, hard drives, and recorded confessions connecting al-Qaeda to the attacks. But this mission was unsuccessful. As one Saudi source put it at the time, "They got the runaround."[34]

Some Arab states employed public-relations campaigns to highlight Iranian malfeasance. On 1 September the Jordanian government publicly revealed that the Iranians had rejected its request for Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's extradition. Shortly afterward, the Saudis reported a similar rebuff from Tehran. Press stories emerged on the connections between Iranian Qods Force and al-Qaeda and between Iran-based al-Qaeda

members and the attacks in Saudi Arabia, as well as on how Abu Musab al-Zarqawi had been spirited into Iraq by the Qods Force.[35]

The United States too could have contributed to this campaign. On 15 October 2003 the State Department spokesman, Richard Boucher, held a press conference in which the Iran–al-Qaeda relationship was discussed at length.

Boucher: The continued presence in Iran of senior officials of terrorist organizations, including al-Qaeda, is a significant cause of concern for us as well as for other people in the region.

Reporter: There are some reports, citing U.S. intelligence, that this al Quds Force, or also called the Jerusalem Force, is part of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, may be the ones sheltering these al-Qaeda members, including one of Osama bin Laden's sons. Is there—what is the U.S. trying to do to secure, through the Iranians, access to these people? Can you say anything about this Jerusalem Force?

Boucher: No.[36]

In retrospect the United States lost a valuable opportunity here to shape public opinion about the Qods Force and its ties to transnational terrorist groups. A forewarned public might have been better prepared to accept the public-relations campaign against the Qods Force Washington launched several years later.[37]

Depending on their respective agencies, Iranian officials either denied the presence of al-Qaeda detainees in Iran or alluded to investigations already under way by the authorities. For instance, the Foreign Ministry spokesman, Hamid Reza Asefi, told journalists that "al-Qaeda operatives currently in custody have committed crimes in Iran. They will be tried in Iranian courts and will be punished on the basis of the laws of our country."[38] But as we have seen, the Iranian government's approach to al-Qaeda was actually marked by contradictions and feuds among security agencies.

HAJJI QASSEM

In summer 2004, several al-Qaeda members went on a hunger strike at Tehran's notorious Evin Prison. Qassem Soleimani reportedly ordered their transfer to the Imam Ali University, where the Qods Force had built a secure compound, complete with walls, barbed wire, and security cameras.[39] Eventually most, if not all, of the al-Qaeda detainees were brought here, including Saif al-Adl, several of Bin Laden's sons, Mahfouz Ould al-Walid, and Abu Laith al-Libi. Other agencies of the Iranian government had access to it as well. The minister of intelligence, for example, visited the detainees with a message from the Iranian Supreme Leader: "The Islamic Republic is going out of its way to be hospitable to al-Qaeda despite its appalling track record."[40] Mahfouz Ould al-Walid, the former head of Bin Laden's sharia committee, responded, defending al-Qaeda's record and insisting that it had had nothing to do with the 1994 bombings of the Imam Reza Shrine in Mashhad or the 1998 murder of Iranian diplomats in Mazar-e Sharif.[41]

According to later accounts by Iran's al-Qaeda captives, Qassem Soleimani personally kept a low profile at the beginning of their confinement. He did meet with Bin Laden's sons, who took to calling him —respectfully, yet familiarly—"Hajji Qassem." He even told them they had something in common, that the United States regarded all of them as terrorists. At the end of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, Soleimani celebrated the Eid al-Fitr with them.[42] Qassem Soleimani delegated to two Qods Force liaison officers the needs and requests of the rest of the detainees. Some restrictions on them were eased, and a few were even allowed chaperoned trips to Tehran tourist sites and shopping malls.[43] If Soleimani's goal was to curry favor with Osama bin Laden's family and close associates, however, his hospitality produced mixed results. According to Scott-Clark and Levy, at least one senior al-Qaeda captive doubted the Qods Force commander's ultimate intentions: "Being courted by the Qods Force would not preclude Hajji Qassem from giving them up if the price was high. Staying one step ahead of this Machiavelian officer bothered him daily and the captive was not privy to the regular discussions Qassem had with Saif [al-Adl]."[44]

Eventually, the al-Qaeda captives lost their value to Iran; the Americans, the Saudis, and other Gulf Arabs had given up bargaining for them. It also didn't help that the al-Qaeda prisoners were difficult to have around: throughout the decade or so of their imprisonment they staged uprisings, hunger strikes, even a mass breakout.[45] A few succeeded in escaping. Saad bin Laden, for example, fled to Pakistan (where he was killed by a U.S. drone in 2009).[46] Abdullah Saeed al-Libi managed to flee his Qods Force captors wearing his wife's chador (outer garment and head covering) and spent nearly a year roaming Iran and Pakistan searching for Osama bin Laden and the rest of the al-Qaeda leadership.[47]

MUTUAL SUSPICION

Eventually Osama bin Laden came to the conclusion that pressuring Tehran was the only way he could free his family members held captive in Iran. Consequently, al-Qaeda operatives kidnapped an Iranian diplomat in Pakistan and exchanged him for Osama Bin Laden's wife Khariah, who was taken to Zahedan under Qods Force escort to cross into Pakistan.[48] As this case and others demonstrate, Bin Laden's relations with Iran were fraught with mutual suspicion and deep mistrust. Bin Laden gave voice to these sentiments in an 8 January 2011 letter to his sons Othman and Mohammed in which he warned them about sophisticated Iranian tracking devices:

> You and the brethren should remember any questionable action or observation in any hospital in Iran. If they inject you with a shot, this shot might be loaded with a tiny chip. The syringe size may be normal but the needle is expected to be larger than normal size. The chip size may be as long as a seed of grain but very thin and smooth. Notice if they take any of you for an operation, for good or no reason, and inject you.[49]

Later in 2011, a new Iran/al-Qaeda deal appeared to be in the works. Qassem Soleimani reportedly was trying to negotiate a compact under which his Qods Force would aid al-Qaeda in planning attacks from which Tehran would benefit.[50] Washington apparently picked up the scent of these and other negotiations; it released a statement alleging that al-Qaeda

recruits were transiting Iran to Afghanistan and Pakistan. It identified Ezedin Abdel Aziz Khalil as an “Iran-based senior al-Qaeda facilitator currently living and operating in Iran under an agreement between al-Qaeda and the Iranian government. Iranian authorities maintain a relationship with Khalil and have permitted him to operate within Iran’s borders since 2005.”[51]

In 2015–16 the remaining al-Qaeda detainees in Iran, including Saif al-Adl, were released to Syria. The official line out of Tehran was that they had been expelled.[52] Thus, their departure was as shrouded in mystery as had been their arrival fourteen years before. But the episode stands as a metaphor for the Iran/al-Qaeda relationship as a whole: enemies of enemies could be friends, but only for the short term and in carefully defined circumstances.

11

Iran and Afghanistan after 9/11

All things considered, the events of 11 September and their immediate aftermath represented net gains for Tehran. The Taliban was ousted (although too quickly for Tehran's tastes), and the Iranians enjoyed close ties with many of the key figures in the interim Afghan government led by Hamid Karzai. Tehran was among the first to extend diplomatic recognition to that government; as ambassador it sent Mohammed Ibrahim Taherian, a skilled diplomatic operator with prior experience in Afghan affairs. A Qods Force officer, Ali Reza Hassan Kazemi-Qomi, was appointed consul general in the strategic western city of Herat; a few years later he would reemerge as ambassador in Baghdad.[1]

TEHRAN-KABUL TENSIONS

There were, however, tense moments in bilateral relations between Kabul and Tehran, and some of these stemmed from Tehran's ties to Afghan power brokers not in Kabul's good graces—Ismail Khan, for example. The Revolutionary Guards had been dealing with this western Afghan warlord since the early 1980s. The Iranians sheltered Ismail Khan when he escaped from the Taliban in 1998; after the Taliban abandoned Herat in late 2001, the IRGC helped reinstall him in that city as "Emir of the West." Later, rumors surfaced that the Revolutionary Guards had trained a 350-man Army of Mohammed to help Ismail Khan defy President Karzai's efforts to remove him from office.[2]

Hard-liners in Tehran openly questioned Karzai's close ties to the United States and the CIA. At one point, Iranian officials alleged that Kabul was

backing a Salafist (reform Sunni) jihadi group called Jundallah (Army of God), which was waging a terrorist campaign in Iran's Sistan va Baluchistan Province. The Afghan government countered that the Qods Force was arming and training the scattered remnants of the defeated Taliban and other anti-Kabul groups.[3]

Like Pakistan, Iran doubted the West had the will to stay in Afghanistan for the long term. These doubts were probably magnified by President Bush's focus on Iraq in public speeches and interviews. When U.S. forces led a coalition into Iraq in 2003, the Iranians began shifting their covertaction resources away from Afghanistan to that country. Once again Afghanistan slid down the priority list for both Tehran and Washington, although the Iranians could not ignore their eastern neighbor for very long.

IRANIAN GOALS AND POLICY

Unlike Iraq in 2003, where Qods Force dominance of Iranian policy was evident early on, for Afghanistan the Foreign Ministry retained some influence. In fact, Iran's goals for Afghanistan remained surprisingly static for the first ten years or so after the Taliban's 2001 defeat. They included a pro-Tehran government in Kabul, diminished Saudi and Pakistani influence, especially in western Afghanistan, and a reduced American military presence in the country. In addition, Tehran wanted to prevent or otherwise deter the United States from using western Afghanistan as a base from which to subvert Iran. Other goals, like repatriating Afghan refugees and controlling the Afghan poppy/opium mafias, were of secondary importance.[4]

By 2005 the Iranian government began to fine-tune a two-track policy toward Afghanistan. The first was engaging the Afghan government and some of its Western allies. One manifestation of this engagement came to light several years later when the *New York Times* reported that an Iranian official was routinely handing over suitcases of cash to Omar Daudzai, Karzai's chief of staff. Karzai characterized the estimated $830,000 he received from Iran through Daudzai as necessary for "good relations."[5] Other facets of this track included humanitarian aid deliveries, through organizations like the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation and the Iranian

Red Crescent Society, and a campaign proselytizing Khomeini's *Velayat-e Faqih* ideology.[6]

The second track of Iran's policy was covert: the training and arming of anticoalition militias. What made the policy particularly controversial—at least in the eyes of some Western analysts—was that it entailed clandestine support for groups like Hezb-e Islami and the Haqqani Network, whose ideologies were anti-Shiite in nature. Still, as we have seen, the pragmatic Qods Force never let ideology get in the way of policy, especially if that policy weakened the "Great Satan" (the United States). Responsibility for "track two" was assigned to Department 4000 (as the Ansar Corps), now commanded by Brigadier Hussein Musavi.[7]

In 2005 the Ansar Corps initiated contacts with Taliban commanders based in western Afghanistan. These talks were most likely inspired by the imminent deployment of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to southern Afghanistan and the creation of a U.S. "provincial reconstruction team" in Farah Province, which borders Iran. Another contributing factor was the publicized American decision to begin refurbishing an air base at Shindand in Herat Province (see map 3). Tehran would have seen this last as an alarming indication of an American effort to build permanent bases close to Iran's vulnerable eastern border.[8]

MAP 3. Western Afghanistan

In reality, however—and as American officials would admit—Afghanistan had become an “economy-of-force theater”: vital intelligence, logistics, and specialoperations assets were prioritized instead for Iraq.[9] The little that was left for Afghanistan was dedicated to the most pressing emergencies, like destroying Taliban and al-Qaeda sanctuaries. Given this relative paucity of resources for and lack of interest in western Afghanistan, it was some time before Washington and its allies grasped the dimension of the Iranian threat in western Afghanistan, before they really understood what Iran was doing.

MIXED MESSAGES

On 11 April 2007, U.S. forces intercepted a truck convoy bound for Kandahar. In one of the vehicles was a small arsenal of weapons, including mortars, ammunition, and C4 explosives, some of which carried Iranian markings.[10] The seizure prompted a public statement by the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Peter Pace: “It is not as clear in Afghanistan which Iranian entity is responsible, but we have intercepted weapons in Afghanistan headed for the Taliban that were made in Iran. Either the leadership of [Iran] knows what their armed forces are doing, or they don’t know. And in either case that’s a problem.”[11] It was an important statement from a senior American officer, a public expression of skepticism that Iran was carrying out a state-level covert, anticoalition policy in Iraq and Afghanistan.

One day after General Pace’s remarks, Richard Boucher, then the assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asia, added another take on Iranian policy in Afghanistan: “Over, say, the last year or so there have been increasing concerns raised over Iran’s behavior in Afghanistan. Involvement that goes beyond the sort of cultural, commercial and educational, and starts going into reports of involvement in political areas or reports of contacts and arms supply to the Taliban.”[12]

Such implicit American warnings do not appear to have deterred the Iranians, for in May and June 2007 additional Iranian weapons were intercepted in Afghanistan, including components of explosively formed penetrators (EFPs)—essentially, significantly enhanced forms, in terms of penetration, of the improvised explosive devices (IEDs) already cutting a lethal swath through coalition forces in Iraq. ISAF officials therefore had good reason to fear the introduction of these weapons to Afghanistan. Some reports indicated that Afghan militias were being trained on EFPs at a Qods Force training camp near Tehran called Jalilabad.[13]

Unfortunately, the official U.S. response to the EFP story was confused and contradictory. Press sources indicated there was no “direct evidence” that “high levels” of the Iranian government were cognizant of the appearance of Iranian-sourced EFP components in Afghanistan. A “senior” Department of Defense official said that the Iranians “portray themselves as supporters of the Karzai government [but] it remains to be seen whether

they're basically trying to play both sides."[14] Further muddying the waters was that Washington policy makers found too unequivocal a statement by Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns that "it's certainly coming from the government of Iran. It's coming from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps command."[15] Subsequently, the State Department's spokesman tried walking back Burns' statement: "We absolutely are certain that there are Iranian-origin weapons flowing into Afghanistan to the Taliban. We do not know the extent of any Iranian government involvement."[16] Tehran, it would appear, had to conclude from statements like these that the U.S. government was divided over whether or not the Iranians were generating unrest inside Afghanistan.

ARMS SHIPMENTS

On 5 September 2007, a team from the United Kingdom's elite Special Boat Squadron (SBS) tracked two trucks crossing from Iran into Afghanistan's Farah Province. The SBS team stopped the trucks and discovered material for at least fifty IEDs and EFPs.[17] The ISAF commander, Gen. Dan McNeill, commented on this seizure to the press, "I cannot see how it is possible for at least the Iranian military, probably the Qods Force[,] to not have known of this convoy These EFPs have caused me some anxiety. I would say whoever put these together had the benefit of not only knowledge, but also some technology and machines."[18]

A few months later, in January 2008, British forces found two HN-5 man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS) near the Kandahar air base. The HN-5 was a Chinese knockoff of the venerable Soviet SA-7 Grail; the serial numbers of these weapons had been rubbed off to disguise their provenance. Since Iran was one of the only users of the HN-5 in the region, some speculation centered on it as the source.[19] Given ISAF's heavy reliance on helicopters for transport and close air support, the United States and its allies were understandably sensitive to the presence of MANPADS in Afghanistan. Still more arms caches were uncovered in Herat containing such weapons of Iranian origin as antitank mines, armorpiercing bullets, and mortars.[20]

When newly elected President Barack Obama announced his intent to surge American forces in Afghanistan, Tehran saw no reason to change its

goals or policy there. The Iranians continued to engage the Karzai government in routine diplomacy and to ship development aid to, especially, the western provinces of Herat and Farah and to Nimruz in the south. On the covert side, the Qods Force trained and armed mostly Sunni Afghan insurgents to carry out anticoalition operations in western Afghanistan.[21]

TRAINING CAMPS

The Ansar Corps ran at least five training camps in eastern Iran, and some of these dated back to the 1980s, when the Revolutionary Guards trained proxies for operations against communist Afghanistan. Any misgivings Taliban trainees may have had about working with Iranian Shia had been overshadowed by a desire to defeat the common enemy. As one Taliban militant trained in Iran later put it, "Our religions and our histories are different, but our target is the same—we both want to kill Americans."[22]

Many of the Afghan trainees were funneled through Nimruz, a remote province in southern Afghanistan that bordered Iran. Lightly guarded Nimruz had long been a favorite transit zone for smugglers operating out of Afghanistan's prime poppy-growing areas in neighboring Helmand Province. Once recruits had crossed the border into Iran they were met by Qods Force officers in white SUVs and whisked off to camps in the Zabol-Zahedan area. At the camps the Afghan recruits received up to three months' training in small arms, assembling and using IEDs, preparing ambushes, and basic infantry tactics.[23] One participant would later describe his Iranian trainers: "They were strong on the planning side. We would sit in the tents and they would take us through things like where the best escape routes were, making sure we had good cover, and where to place our lookouts."[24] In addition, according to unconfirmed press reports, the Qods Force offered a thousand dollars for killing an American soldier and six thousand for evidence of a destroyed American military vehicle.[25]

U.S. SURGE

Both the United States and the United Kingdom continued to intercept Iranian arms flowing across the Afghan border; however, the United States

did not create a special operations task force to combat the Qods Force in Afghanistan as it had in Iraq.[26] Moreover, American public diplomacy remained disjointed when it came to Qods Force activities in Afghanistan. While some American government sources were reported in the press as alleging that Iran was providing insurgents with material assistance, others cautioned reporters that Washington lacked evidence that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei had authorized such assistance. In an August 2009 situation report, the new ISAF commander, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, noted that Iran was a helpful source of development assistance for Afghanistan.[27] But McChrystal's director of intelligence, Maj. Gen. Michael Flynn, leaned much further than his boss in asserting Iranian malfeasance in Afghanistan. According to Flynn, who would later gain notoriety of his own as Donald Trump's first national security adviser, the key problem was the Qods Force: "The Quds Force is an organization that needs to be checked at the door. And if the country of Iran wants to act responsibly on the world stage, they need to take that organization, dismantle it, and get it to quit acting like a nation-state-backed terrorist organization."[28]

Flynn argued that the dissemination of EFPs by the Qods Force to Afghan insurgents was a red line that could trigger American retaliation: "There's been only a couple of EFP discoveries here. They have not taken that strategic step, and I would recommend that they don't. That would be a huge strategic line to cross, especially given what they've done in Iraq."[29]

Yet in 2009–10, as the United States surged forces into Afghanistan, there were troubling signs that the Qods Force was stepping up weapons deliveries to insurgents. In 2010, when Taliban commanders were making preparations for another summer offensive in eastern and southern Afghanistan, coalition intelligence reported that Taliban commanders were meeting with the Qods Force in Iran and discussing increased shipments of arms, including MANPADS.[30]

In February 2011, British and Afghan forces intercepted another arms convoy transiting Nimruz Province from the Iranian border and seized 122-mm rockets, as well as ammunition and mortars. According to British sources, the weapons had been "doctored and tampered with … but were of proven Iranian origin."[31] ISAF was especially concerned by the artillery rockets, with which the Taliban could strike coalition bases from a considerable distance. Britain's foreign secretary, William Hague, in

contrast to his counterparts in Washington, issued a statement devoid of any ambiguity: “I am extremely concerned by the latest evidence that Iran continues to supply the Taliban with weaponry This is completely unacceptable. It is not the behavior of a responsible neighbor.”[32] The Iranian defense minister, now Ahmed Vahidi, retorted that the coalition’s allegations were “ridiculous lies.”[33] (This, of course, was the same Ahmed Vahidi who had once commanded the Qods Force.)

As the war in Afghanistan dragged on, the coalition’s commitment visibly faded. The United States drew down its surge force, while other ISAF partners withdrew their contingents altogether. Officially, the coalition had transitioned to a training and advisory role, under which the Afghan army and police would handle most operations against the Taliban. But Iran’s aid to Taliban commanders continued. How could it not? Iran was fated to be a permanent neighbor of Afghanistan, and if the West’s interest in that country was diminishing, then Tehran had to look to its own security, hedging its bets by maintaining ties to the Taliban as well as to the existing Afghan government. In May 2016, a U.S. drone killed Mullah Akhtar Mansour, who was returning from meetings in Iran. As Mullah Omar’s replacement, Akhtar was a valuable target. Press reports at the time hinted that the new Taliban emir was receiving $800,000 per month from the Iranian government.[34]

DRUG SMUGGLING

Of course, Afghan governance was not Iran’s only concern. Afghanistan was the poppy capital of the world, the main producer of the feedstock, raw opium poppy plants, for opium and heroin. Afghanistan’s landlocked situation meant that the poppy and its derivatives had to be smuggled across Pakistan, Tajikistan, or Iran before reaching major markets in Europe and North America. Inside Iran, the IRGC took a lead role in combating international narcotics trafficking. We have already seen how Qassem Soleimani made a name for himself in the 1990s by battling heavily armed drug convoys in eastern Iran. But having the Revolutionary Guards direct Iran’s drug wars was like leaving the fox in charge of the henhouse. The Ansar Corps, for example, had a history of close ties to Afghan drug lords like Hajji Juma Khan. Indeed, the Iranians used the same drug-smuggling

networks that were flooding Iran itself with opium and heroin to push weapons into Afghanistan. In return, the IRGC turned a blind eye to some of the drug convoys entering eastern Iran from Afghanistan and Pakistan.[35]

In March 2012, the U.S. Department of the Treasury added to its list of "Specially Designated Nationals" (with whom American citizens were prohibited from dealing, and whose assets were blocked) Gholam Reza Baghbani, a Qods Force officer, for drug trafficking. As the department's statement put it, "Baghbani allowed Afghan narcotics traffickers to smuggle opiates through Iran in return for assistance. For example, Afghan narcotics traffickers moved weapons to the Taliban on behalf of Baghbani. General Baghbani has helped facilitate the smuggling of heroin precursor chemicals through the Iranian border. He also helped facilitate shipments of opium into Iran."[36]

In the end, though, Iranian covert action inside Afghanistan was overshadowed by that of its rival, Pakistan. This difference was owing to the relative weight each assigned to Afghanistan. Pakistan's equivalent of the Qods Force, the Inter-Services Intelligence directorate, or ISI, has been fueling insurgency in Afghanistan for decades and exercises far more leverage over that country.[37] That leverage was dramatically enhanced when the Taliban recaptured Kabul in August 2021 and conquered the Panjshir Valley a few weeks later. It remains to be seen whether Iran can maintain its relationship with the Taliban now that the latter is back in power. If history is any guide, the prospects for a continued Qods Force–Taliban alliance appear dim: Iran does not want an emboldened militant Salafist state on its eastern borders, while elements of the Taliban leadership continue to regard Shia—both Iranian and Afghan—as practitioners of a "deviant" brand of Islam.

PART III

Iraq

12

The Greater Prize

Whenever Iran prioritizes its foreign-policy interests, Iraq is always going to be more important than Afghanistan. Iraq's Shia shrine cities are of tremendous historical, cultural, and political value to Shia Iran. Then there is Iraq's oil wealth, which could enable it one day to pursue regional hegemony and the weapons needed to achieve it. Last, but certainly not least, is the tragic legacy of the eight-year Iran-Iraq War that left hundreds of thousands dead or wounded on both sides.

The war may have ended in 1988, but intense mutual suspicion has pervaded bilateral relations since and refuses to fade. The fact is that neither side achieved its goals in the war. Saddam Hussein didn't win. Instead he bankrupted his country and then aggravated his troubles by invading Kuwait in 1990. Ayatollah Khomeini didn't liberate Baghdad. In fact, his armies didn't liberate any Iraqi city or town of consequence. Iraq continued to shelter and arm a group of Iranian "Islamo-Marxists" called the Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK, People's Holy Warriors) that tried to spark a revolution in Iran. The MEK also maintained intelligence networks in Iran that sent back a steady stream of information on nuclear weapons research and the Qods Force.[1]

DIPLOMACY AND ESPIONAGE

For its part, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Intelligence Directorate maintained an unconventional-warfare infrastructure inside Iraq until 1990–91, when the project was folded into Department 1000 of the Qods Force. Department 1000 (also called the Ramazan Corps—see chapter

4, table 1) now had direct responsibility for the command, control, and communications facilities as well as the training camps associated with the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq and the Badr Corps.

After the events of 11 September 2001 brought U.S. forces to Iran's eastern borders, the primary Qods Force objective was to ascertain American intentions toward Afghanistan, al-Qaeda, Iraq, and Iran itself. Among the questions that Iranian leaders must have been asking themselves in 2002 were:

- If the United States attacked Iraq, would it remove Saddam from power? If so, who would replace him?
- How long would U.S. forces remain in Iraq after ousting Saddam Hussein?
- Did Washington intend to build permanent bases in Iraq?
- Would the Americans conduct hostilities against Iran from bases in Iraq?
- Would the Americans work with the Mojahedin-e Khalq and other exiled Iranian opposition groups to subvert Iran?
- Would Washington be able to muster an international coalition against Saddam like it did in 1990–91?

Answering these difficult questions required diplomacy as well as espionage, and the Qods Force played in both arenas. But above all else, the Qods Force and its commander, Brigadier Qassem Soleimani, were formulating and executing Tehran's policy toward Iraq. For Western diplomats, trained to negotiate about Iraq with their opposite numbers in the Iranian Foreign Ministry, the Qods Force's dual missions were contentious and confusing. At several junctures Western analysts grappled with the question that always haunted Iranian foreign policy: *Who speaks for Tehran?*

After the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, Qassem Soleimani appointed a known Qods Force officer named Ali Reza Hassan KazemiQomi as Iran's chargé d'affaires in Baghdad. Other Qods Force officers were placed in Iran's quasi-official consulates in Basra, Irbil, Soleimaniya, and Karbala. The staffing of Iran's diplomatic facilities

suggested that while the Foreign Ministry maintained the outward façade of foreign policy, the Qods Force had the final say on how that policy was formulated and carried out.[2] The Foreign Ministry managed the face-to-face meetings with American counterparts prior to and immediately after the 2003 invasion of Iraq. That such meetings took place at all was a minor miracle, considering the deep mutual mistrust. On the other hand, neither side could afford to neglect completely the other's perspective when it came to something as momentous as the removal of Saddam Hussein from power.

For his part, Soleimani let the Foreign Ministry take the lead in talks with the Americans but played a hands-on role in preinvasion negotiations with the Iraqi opposition.[3] He often used the American interlocutors to pass to the U.S. government messages that in essence said, We back the ouster of Saddam Hussein; however, it is imperative that Washington transfer the reins of power to a new Iraqi government as soon as possible. Further, the new Iraqi regime must represent the majority of Iraqis (i.e., the Iraqi Shiites). Finally, the United States must not only commit itself to the prompt withdrawal of its forces from Iraq but also refrain from using Iranian oppositionists like the MEK against Tehran.[4]

But diplomacy alone would not give Qassem Soleimani all the answers he needed, so he turned to espionage as well. Under most conditions, Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security had the lead for foreign-intelligence collection abroad; however, the IRGCID and the Qods Force each maintained a separate intelligence collection and analytical apparatus, especially in states neighboring Iran. On the eve of the American-led invasion of Iraq, the IRGC's primary intelligence questions undoubtedly included:

- What was the disposition of Saddam's army? Did it intend to defend at the border or inside Iraq's cities?
- What was the status of Saddam's supposed stockpile of weapons of mass destruction? If he had any, would he employ them against the coalition? Was there any possibility he would use them against Israel or Iran?
- What were the dispositions and numbers of U.S. and British forces flowing into Kuwait and Jordan? How many troops would be used for

the invasion of Iraq?
- What were the CIA and the U.S. Army's Special Forces doing in northern Iraq?
- What were the official Turkish and Gulf Arab responses to the upcoming war? Who backed the invasion? Who did not?
- What kind of government did the Americans plan on creating once Saddam was gone?[5]

Many answers could be gleaned from a careful reading of the international press. For others, the Iranians relied on human-intelligence assets as well as Iraqi opposition leaders like Ahmed Chalabi and Jalal Talabani. Both had the ear of influential American politicians and surely passed on their impressions to Qassem Soleimani.[6]

CREATING POLICY OPTIONS

Unlike the case of Afghanistan, where the Iranians were caught off guard by 11 September 2001, the lead-up to the Iraq War gave Tehran ample time to prepare. From the president on down, American officials were not hiding the fact that Iraq was going to be the next target after Afghanistan. In light of this clear declaration of American intent, it was Qassem Soleimani's job to give his boss, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, policy options that extended beyond conventional diplomatic and military responses. But first Iran's Supreme Council for National Security had to discuss the nature of the American threat and how Tehran should respond to it.

On 9 September 2002, Khamenei reportedly chaired a meeting of the SCNS that included IRGC commander Yahya Rahim-Safavi, the minister for intelligence, and Qassem Soleimani. The SCNS discussed the growing American rhetorical, economic, and military pressure on Iraq and assessed the likelihood of an American invasion. Both Safavi and Soleimani believed the Americans would attack Iraq. They also warned that if Washington succeeded in overthrowing Saddam and installing a new government in Baghdad it would likely attack Iran next.[7] The SCNS decided that Tehran must prepare for a American invasion of Iraq by adopting "an active policy in order to prevent long-term and short-term dangers to Iran."[8] The question

was how Iran could do this given the asymmetry in its conventional power relative to the United States and its lack of nuclear weapons. Since Tehran was not prepared to accept American supremacy in the region, the only viable strategy was unconventional warfare.

In the months leading up to the invasion, Qassem Soleimani likely developed contingency plans for the many uncertainties Iran faced. Depending on how Washington's Iraq war turned out, Iran could find itself in a very vulnerable position, surrounded by U.S. ground forces in two neighboring countries and a permanent naval presence in the Persian Gulf. Fortunately for Soleimani and his staff, the Qods Force had both a deep bench of unconventional-warfare operators with extensive experience in Iraq and decades of interaction with important Iraqi players.

THE RAMAZAN CORPS

The Qods Force's Iraq-related operations were run out of Department 1000, the Ramazan Corps. A descendant of the IRGC's Ramazan Base (see chapter 4), Department 1000 was now led by Ahmed Foruzandeh, an IRGC expert on Iraq. Directly subordinated to Foruzandeh's forward headquarters in Ahvaz were the so-called Iranian consulates in Iraq. The consulate in Irbil served as Iran's primary liaison with the leader of Iraq's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), Masood Barzani, while the Soleimaniya consulate fulfilled the same function for Jalal Talabani and his Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. The ambiguous nature of both consulates would bedevil U.S.-Iraqi relations after 2003.[9]

Underneath the Ramazan Corps were three regional commands, each responsible for a geographical region of Iraq (see figure 5). The Nasser (Victory, in Arabic) Command, led by Col. Mahmud Farhadi and headquartered in the Iranian Kurdistan town of Naqadeh, focused on Kurds in Iraq, including those fighting Saddam Hussein (KDP, PUK, and Harakat al-Islam), those opposed to Tehran (the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran), and the anti-Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party (known by its Kurdish acronym PKK). In the weeks leading up to the March 2003 invasion of Iraq, the Nasser Command would have been monitoring CIA and 10th Special Forces Group personnel in Iraqi Kurdistan.[10] The Fajr (Dawn) Command was led by Col. Hamid Taghavi. Born in Ahvaz and a veteran of the Iran-

Iraq War, Colonel Taghavi was an experienced Qods Force operative who knew his region and its players better than most. Like many devout IRGC officers of his generation, Taghavi bore a *turbah* mark on his forehead, an imprint left from the clay tablet used in the Shia prayer ritual. With its headquarters in Ahvaz, his Fajr Command focused on the southern Iraqi tribes, the marsh areas that straddled the Iran-Iraq border, and the cities of Basra, Nasiriya, and Amara.[11] The third of the Ramazan Corps' regional bases was the Zafar (Victory, in Farsi) Command. Located at an IRGC base near Mehran on the border with Iraq, Zafar benefited from its close proximity to Baghdad and the shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala.[12]

Separate from the Ramazan Corps and reporting directly to Qassem Soleimani in Tehran was the Kosar Supply Staff. The Arabic word *al-Kawthar* (in Persian, *kosar*) means "abundance," an allusion to the Islamic tradition that a river bearing this name flows in Paradise. Run by Brigadier Mansour Haq, the Kosar Staff handled the logistic needs of Qods Force operatives and such key proxies as the 9th Badr Corps.[13] The Kosar Supply Corps also served as a coordinating office for Iranian entities involved in Iraqrelated relief work, such as the Iranian Red Crescent Society, the Shahid Foundation, and the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation. These agencies did in fact provide humanitarian assistance, but they also served as useful cover for Qods Force and MOIS operations in Iraq after 2003.[14]

ALLIES

As the invasion of Iraq unfolded in March 2003, the Qods Force relied on a constellation of Iraqi and non-Iraqi allies. Unlike Iranian proxies, such as the Badr Corps, these allies were not necessarily bound to Iranian goals, nor were they always responsive to Iranian demands. Take al-Qaeda, for example. We have already seen how the Qods Force provided safe haven and assistance to al-Qaeda leaders fleeing Afghanistan in 2001 and 2002. The Qods Force helped Abu Musab al-Zarqawi cross Iran to Iraq, the Kurdish region of which he entered in 2002 or 2003. There Zarqawi joined the Ansar al-Islam, which was also receiving covert Iranian assistance.[15]

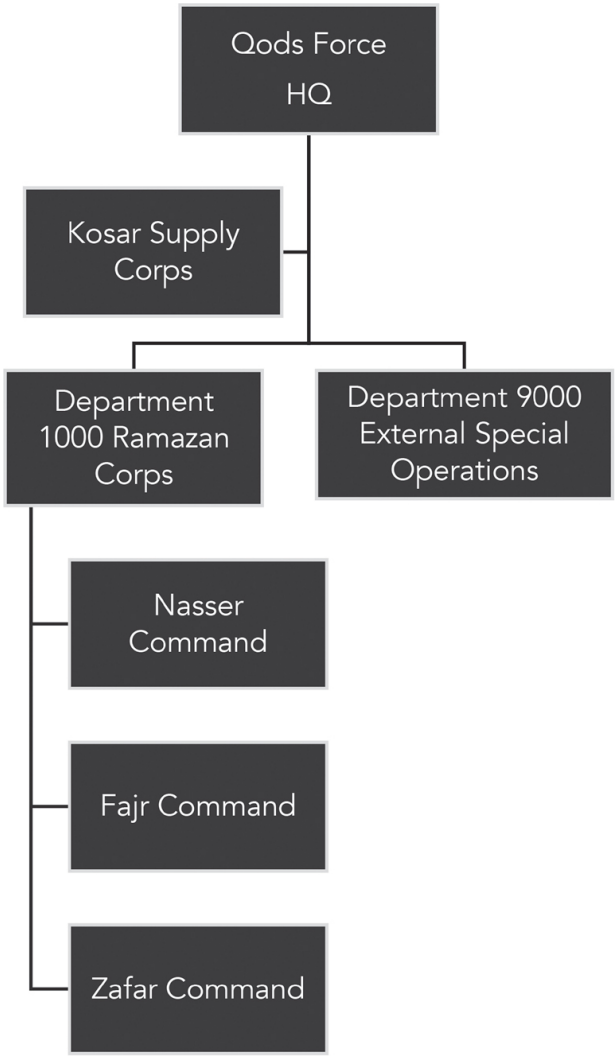

FIGURE 5. Qods Force Operations in Iraq, 2003–11

The Qods Force no doubt regarded Zarqawi as a useful asset so long as he targeted American rather than Iranian interests. After the fall of Saddam, Zarqawi would form a new organization called al-Qaeda in Iraq that nearly sparked an Iraqi civil war by attacking Shiite mosques and shrines. Zarqawi's operations might therefore be seen today as blowback against the Qods Force, but in 2003 his sectarian agenda was not necessarily clear to Iran. To the contrary, Zarqawi must have seemed a good bet, since he intended to launch a terrorist campaign against the coalition in Iraq.[16] The Qods Force in time perceived the problem with allies like Ansar al-Islam or

Zarqawi: their ultimate goals often conflicted with those of the Iranians. Moreover, they resented and resisted any Iranian attempts to control them.

PROXIES

Naturally, to employ an Iranian-controlled proxy was the preferred option, although even here Qods Force control varied from group to group. Iran's cultivation of Iraqi proxies had been a result of lessons taught by the 1980s war with Iraq and anti-Saddam uprisings in the 1990s: Tehran now understood that loyal and effective Iraqi surrogates were force enhancers, given their familiarity with the languages and cultures of Iraq. Good Iraqi proxies could fit seamlessly into Iraqi society—or at least their specific communities—and from there gather useful intelligence on Saddam Hussein, regime protection forces, and Iraqi public opinion.

Iran did not have a Lebanese Hezbollah–type organization in Iraq, mainly because the Iraqi Shia community was too large and its politics too diffuse to tolerate any single party acting on its behalf. Iran did have the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq. Created in the early 1980s by Iraqi Shia exiles with IRGC help, SCIRI aimed at creating an Islamic state in Iraq modeled after Iran's *Velayat-e Faqih*. By the mid-1980s the Revolutionary Guards had also trained a unit of Iraqi exiles and former POWs for combat operations against Iraq, the Badr Corps (chapter 3).[17]

Another Iraqi ally was the Dawa Party. A venerable political entity (it had been created in the late 1950s by Shia intellectuals), Dawa had tentacles that extended beyond Iraq into several Persian Gulf monarchies as well.[18] Iranian leverage over the Dawa was never as comprehensive as its hold on SCIRI. However, when the Dawa needed safe havens after Saddam Hussein cracked down on it in the 1980s and 1990s Iran offered one, although accepting it must have cost Dawa some of its independence.

In addition to SCIRI and the Dawa Party, the Qods Force had recourse to smaller Iraqi political parties and armed groups. Among these we find the 15th Shaaban (named after the failed Shia uprising against Saddam in 1991), Tharallah (Revenge of God) and the Seyed al-Shohadda (Master of the Martyrs, see the glossary), which was created by ex–Badr Corps intelligence officers after the 1991 Shia revolt. All had close ties to the

Qods Force; some received regular Qods Force stipends to maintain their clandestine networks in Iraq.[19]

Then there was a small group of Iraqi Shia commanders who had fought alongside the IRGC during the war with Iraq but now preferred to remain outside the SCIRI or Dawa Party orbit. Some of these men were actually Revolutionary Guards officers, for whom the lines between citizenship and ultimate loyalties were often blurry. Among them we find Abu Mahdi al-Mohandis, a dual Iraqi-Iranian national who quit the Badr Corps in 2002 to carve out, a few years later, a separate niche for himself in the new, post-Saddam Iraq. Al-Mohandis was very close to Qassem Soleimani. In fact, he was to die in the same drone strike that killed Soleimani in January 2020.[20] Another "independent" Iraqi Shia warlord with strong IRGC ties was Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani. Unlike with al-Mohandis, it was never clear to what extent al-Sheibani remained a member of the Badr Corps after the fall of Saddam. In any case, he entered Iraq on the heels of the coalition in April 2003 and made his way to Najaf, where he began recruiting his network. Later, al-Sheibani became a key player in the Qods Force's effort to disseminate explosively formed penetrators in Iraq.[21]

Thus, on the eve of the American invasion of Iraq Qassem Soleimani could offer his boss several policy options in the areas of espionage, diplomacy, and unconventional warfare. The nature of the Qods Force response to America's invasion would depend on many variables, including U.S. policy toward Iran, American efforts to subvert Iran from Iraq, perceived U.S. successes or failures in Iraq, and international pressure on Tehran over its nuclear activities.

13

A Multidimensional Campaign in Iraq

On 20 March 2003, an American-led coalition invaded Iraq. Although it was not evident to American analysts at the time, the Qods Force reacted almost immediately with a two-phased campaign of its own. The first phase included deploying Qods Force operatives into Iraq, monitoring coalition operations, and building a clandestine infrastructure, while it waited to see whether the American experiment in regime change succeeded or not. Only later would the Qods Force implement phase two, which entailed plausibly deniable kinetic operations against the coalition.

PHASE ONE

During phase one, which coincided with the invasion of Iraq, the Badr Corps deployed to Iraq from its bases in Iran. Eventually, thousands of Badr personnel filled the power vacuum created by the retreat of Saddam Hussein's forces, especially in Iraq's Shia south. At that time the Badr Corps was under strict orders from its IRGC handlers to avoid armed confrontations with coalition forces.[1]

The primary Badr Corps focus was southern Iraq. With its large Shia majority key cities of Basra, Nasiriya, and Amara, and its shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala, this region was to serve as the launching pad for Iran's influence campaign. Consequently, Badr operatives were instructed to seize the seats of provincial and municipal power: government offices, Baath Party facilities, and army and police arsenals.[2] Another Badr Corps duty

was spying on coalition forces.[3] Accompanying the Badr Corps were an estimated fifty to a hundred Qods Force and MOIS advisers under cover as clerics, religious students, businessmen, aid workers, and pilgrims flocking to Karbala and Najaf.[4]

The Qods Force immediately began to construct a clandestine network, reactivating old agents and arranging safe houses. It also collected intelligence on the Americans and their allies, including orders of battle, objectives, and observed strengths and weaknesses. Finally, the Qods Force sought intelligence on the Iraqis: Who was resisting the coalition? Who might be amenable to working clandestinely for Iran or one of its Iraqi cutouts? Over time, the Qods Force and MOIS recruited hundreds of Iraqi informants, some of whom infiltrated the post-Saddam government, while others joined the emerging resistance movement. Later in the occupation, American intelligence officers learned that a Qods Force officer entered Iraq every forty-five days or so from Kermanshah to pay off Iraqi informants in Diyala and Wasit. No doubt similar arrangements were in place for other Iraqi cities and provinces.[5]

In the weeks leading up to Operation Iraqi Freedom, CIA operatives and the U.S. Army's 10th Special Forces Group infiltrated northern Iraq to monitor the Kurdish jihadi Ansar al-Islam. A growing body of alarming intelligence reporting was reaching Washington that this group was experimenting with chemical and biological weapons. Ansar al-Islam's suspected "weapons of mass destruction" facility was wiped out by cruise missiles in the opening hours of the invasion of Iraq; an estimated three hundred survivors fled to Iran. The Qods Force Nasser Command transferred them to the Jalilabad training facility, where they regrouped and rearmed under Qods Force tutelage. They were also given training in suicide bombings, laying ambushes, sniping, and using improvised explosive devices and returned to Iraq to wage war on the coalition.[6]

The Ansar al-Islam story is noteworthy for the light it sheds on Iran's subversive campaign. Also, the nature of Ansar al-Islam itself is significant. A Salafist organization, Ansar al-Islam had no natural affinities for Shia Iran but did not let that get in the way of a temporary alliance against a greater enemy. The Qods Force would make similar tactical alliances with Sunni groups in Iraq in the future, although its main focus remained the Iraqi Shia.[7]

INITIAL AMERICAN RESPONSES

U.S. intelligence picked up signs of the Badr Corp's deployment into Iraq, but there were higher priorities: defeating Saddam's army, neutralizing the Saddam Fedayeen insurgency, securing suspected facilities for weapons of mass destruction, and capturing Baath Party leaders. As a result, when on 30 March 2003 U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) directed that Badr Corps units openly displaying arms be disarmed, the order was largely ignored.[8]

The coalition was operating in an intelligence vacuum in more ways than one—not just the Iraqi weapons of mass destruction fiasco (none were actually found) but a generally poor understanding of the cultural, social, and political realities of Iraq. Critical intelligence on the Shia communities of Basra, Saddam City, Najaf, Karbala, and Nasiriya was lacking, as was knowledge of Iraqi tribes and Iran's role in local politics.[9] The coalition's intelligence blind spot also extended to the Mojahedin-e Khalq. When U.S. forces seized the group's base at Camp Ashraf north of Baghdad (the MEK was on the American list of designated "foreign terrorist organizations"), they were surprised to find there hundreds of well-armed men and women determined to overthrow the Iranian government.[10] Many in the Iranian leadership suspected the United States would use the MEK as a proxy to destabilize the Islamic Republic.[11] In fact, there apparently was some discussion in Washington regarding the MEK's utility.

On 25 April 2003, during a press conference, the American secretary of defense fired a warning shot across Tehran's bow: "There is no question but that the government of Iran has encouraged people to go into the country, and that they have people in the country attempting to influence the country [A] vocal minority clamoring to transform Iraq in Iran's image will not be permitted to do so."[12] Other American officials were complaining privately that the Revolutionary Guards were "subverting" Iraq, but they did not provide any details.[13]

In the lead-up to the Iraq invasion, Secretary of State Colin Powell invoked the "Pottery Barn Rule": If you break something, you've bought it.[14] Iraq had been broken. Decades of Saddam's misrule, wars, and sanctions followed by an invasion and occupation had rendered the country inert. As a consequence, Powell declared, whether Washington wanted to

admit it publicly or not, rebuilding Iraq was going to be a resource-intensive task that could take decades. It wasn't simply a matter of restoring damaged or decayed physical infrastructure either. Iraq desperately needed all the essential sinews of statehood: a functioning and credible judiciary, a respected civil service, a national police, effective local government. In short, everything that builds legitimacy and confidence in the state, Iraq lacked. Washington refused to call this "nation building," but that was precisely what was required. Ultimately Iran, not the United States, would prove to have had the more realistic long-term strategy to gain influence in Iraq.

MOQTADA AL-SADR

In addition to those of disgruntled Arab Sunnis, who deeply resented their loss of power, and Kurds, who wanted to carve out as much autonomy as they could, the coalition soon faced a challenge from an unexpected quarter —the Shia. The surprising Shia confrontation was embodied in a twenty-nineyear-old seminary student, Moqtada al-Sadr. Respected as the son of a martyred ayatollah and nephew of another, Moqtada exploited his family name to build a formidable constituency among Iraq's urban Shia poor. He tapped into a deep vein of Iraqi Shia nationalism that rejected not only the occupation but also the mainstream Shia political parties, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq and the Dawa, which benefited from that occupation.[15]

The coalition was not alone in being caught off guard by the Sadr phenomenon. Iran too seems to have been surprised by the sudden emergence of Moqtada al-Sadr and its implications for Iranian strategy. Unlike the coalition, which kept Sadr at arm's length, the Iranians decided to get a closer look at the man with the famous name. In early June 2003, Moqtada al-Sadr was invited to Tehran to commemorate the anniversary of Ayatollah Khomeini's death. Accompanying him were senior leaders from the Iraqi Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS), Qais al-Khazali and Mustafa al-Yaqubi.[16]

As a sign of his growing prominence, Qassem Soleimani served as the official host for the OMS visit. Moqtada al-Sadr himself was treated like a foreign dignitary: aside from Soleimani, he was introduced to such movers

and shakers of the Iranian government as Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, and the judiciary chief, Mahmud Hashemi-Shahrudi.[17] But Moqtada al-Sadr's most substantive meetings were with the Qods Force, during which he met Qassem Soleimani's most important lieutenants: Brigadier Abdul Reza Shahlai (also known as Hajji Yusif) and Brigadier Hossein Ansari (Sheikh Ansari). These officers offered to train al-Sadr's militia at Qods Force camps, provide $1 million U.S. as start-up money, and contribute a monthly sum to the OMS budget.[18]

Moqtada did have money problems, but he was reluctant to accept Iranian money at first, worried about how doing so could affect his image as an Iraqi nationalist. He insisted that the Qods Force let him decide how the money was spent. Soleimani acceded to this request, but his battle for control over the Sadrist movement had begun.[19] The June 2003 visit was an opportunity for the Qods Force to size up Moqtada al-Sadr and the threat he could pose to Iranian interests. Later meetings between the Sadrists and the Qods Force involved Abdul Reza Shahlai for the Iranians and Qais al-Khazali for the Sadrists. By 2007, Qods Force aid to Moqtada al-Sadr was running at about $2 million per month.[20]

Once a Qods Force–OMS deal was reached, the Iranians introduced the Sadrists to Lebanese Hezbollah. The lead representative for the latter was Sheikh Mohammed Kawtharani, a senior member of Hezbollah's powerful Political Committee. In effect Kawtharani was Hezbollah's eyes and ears for its Iraq-related operations, which were about to expand exponentially.[21] Hezbollah's value lay in its combat experience against the Israel Defense Forces, its language and culture familiarity, as well as its formidable intelligence and counterintelligence capabilities.[22]

Sometime in July or August 2003—that is, within weeks of Moqtada al-Sadr's meetings in Tehran—Lebanese Hezbollah concluded its own agreement with the OMS. Under its terms, Hezbollah agreed to send some thirty operatives to advise and assist Sadr's new Jaish al-Mahdi (or JAM, Army of the Hidden Imam) militia in recruiting, training, and intelligence work. In addition, some Sadrists would receive training in Iran and Lebanon from Hezbollah and Qods Force experts.[23] Moqtada al-Sadr was a good investment from Tehran's perspective, because his Jaish al-Mahdi fit into the Qods Force's plans to launch plausibly deniable attacks against the coalition. America's war in Iraq was about to get a lot harder.

PHASE TWO: SOLEIMANI RAISES THE STAKES

By the fall of 2003, six months into the U.S.-led occupation of Iraq, the Islamic Republic of Iran had become uneasy. A force of 120,000 American soldiers and Marines and their allies had managed to achieve in *weeks* what half a million or more Iranian soldiers had been unable to accomplish in eight years of war: they had decisively defeated the Iraqi armed forces, occupied Baghdad, and chased Saddam Hussein from power. This large American military presence on Iran's vulnerable western border was bad enough; there were also substantial U.S. military forces in Afghanistan, not to mention in the Persian Gulf region as a whole. Finally, the MEK had publicly exposed several secret Iranian nuclear facilities, and now there was mounting international controversy over Iran's nuclear research program. Given all of these pressures, Tehran naturally welcomed an Iraqi insurgency that could tie down coalition forces.[24]

By the end of 2004 the United States and its allies were struggling to defeat that insurgency, and Iran was recovering much of its preinvasion poise and confidence. One tangible manifestation of this was its reestablishment of an embassy in Baghdad. As chargé d'affaires Tehran sent Ali Reza Hassan Kazemi-Qomi, a veteran Qods Force officer whose previous assignments included consul general in Herat, personal aide to Ali Khamenei, head of the Qods Force's Lebanon Corps, and training supervisor of the Badr Corps in Iran. Khamenei reportedly gave Kazemi-Qomi three tasks: create a network of pro-Iranian Shiite clerics, use humanitarian aid to expand Iranian influence, and ensure that the Americans were pinned down in Iraq.[25]

Earlier that year Qassem Soleimani had decided to implement phase two of his plan, the use of proxies to attack coalition forces ambushes and roadside bombs and bleed them out.[26] Given the risks of attacking a superior military force, this phase was given to a specialized, compartmented Qods Force entity, Department 9000 (see the table in chapter 4). Soleimani entrusted Department 9000 to Abdul Reza Shahlai, a close confidant and the designated Qods Force liaison to Moqtada al-Sadr.[27]

Phase two required more disciplined Iraqi proxies than SCIRI and Badr Corps. To be sure, both were still backed by the Qods Force, which paid their salaries, but SCIRI and the Badr Organization (as it was now styling

itself) were players in Iraqi politics and avoided armed confrontations with the coalition. That left smaller proxies that predated the American invasion of Iraq, such as Tharallah, 15th Shaaban, and Seyed al-Shohadda (Master of the Martyrs), all three of which initiated attacks on the coalition in 2004. Another promising group, although too big and sprawling for Qods Force tastes, was Moqtada al-Sadr's Jaish al-Mahdi.[28]

The unease that had marked Muqtada al-Sadr's early relations with the Iranians persisted after his June 2003 visit to Tehran. Al-Sadr was, as we have seen, wary of Iranian influence over his organization, while for his part Qassem Soleimani reportedly viewed Moqtada as young and reckless.[29] But the JAM needed Qods Force money, weapons, and training, and the Qods Force relied on the JAM for its manpower and influence, especially in Baghdad, Karbala, and Najaf.

2004 SADR UPRISINGS

By spring 2004, Muqtada al-Sadr believed the JAM was ready for a showdown with the Americans. In April and August of that year it staged uprisings in Sadr City, Karbala, Kut, and Najaf. In Najaf, revered by Shiites worldwide as the burial place of Imam Ali, the JAM battled Americans in the world's largest cemetery. At the height of the April battle Abdul Reza Shahlai and his deputy, Hossein Ansari, slipped into Najaf secretly to assess the situation and offer the beleaguered Jaish money, weapons, and technical expertise.[30]

American soldiers fighting in Najaf noted an increase in JAM capabilities. It had been commonly regarded as a "spray and pray" militia with little interest in marksmanship, but now a few Jaish fighters showed a sophisticated understanding of fighting in urban terrain; someone was training them to be snipers and to call in mortar fire.[31] Later, coalition intelligence officers learned that the Qods Force Kosar auxiliary had provided medical aid to wounded JAM combatants. Finally, in a portent of things to come, Qods Force officers also mediated a settlement between the Sadrists and the Iraqi authorities.[32]

After the 2004 JAM rebellions were suppressed, the Qods Force Department 9000 leadership produced an after-action report that detailed the Jaish's deficiencies and recommended improvements. Among the

shortcomings Colonel Ansari identified poor training and an overall deficit of organization and leadership. Brigadier Shahlai recommended that Iran increase shipments of weapons and ammunition to replenish JAM arsenals and train its fighters, in Iran and Lebanon.[33]

SPECIAL GROUPS

The Najaf battles convinced the Qods Force that some promising JAM commanders could be lured away with offers of money, weapons, and training to form what the coalition called "special groups." These were smaller than the JAM and practiced better operational security. They were also more responsive to Iranian direction.[34] One Qods Force officer assigned to each group identified training requirements and handled the provision of Iranian weapons.[35]

Qais al-Khazali was one of the JAM commanders cultivated by the Qods Force. Born in 1974 in Iraq, Qais had studied under Ayatollah Mohammed al-Sadr. In June 2003 he accompanied Moqtada al-Sadr to Tehran, where the Qods Force had an opportunity to evaluate his personality and character. Three years later, Qais al-Khazali had a falling-out with al-Sadr and with Iranian encouragement formed his own group, Asaib Ahl al-Haq (League of the Righteous).[36] The Qods Force relied on such experienced Iraqi combatants, many of whom had long-standing relations with the Revolutionary Guards and pledged allegiance to Iran's Supreme Leader. Qais al-Khazali was to refer to them as "Al-Khamenei groups" to emphasize their absolute loyalty to Tehran.

EFPS

Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani was the epitome of an "Al-Khamenei" commander. A former intelligence officer in the Badr Corps, al-Sheibani was close to the Qods Force leadership. In July 2004, Qods Force and Hezbollah operatives met al-Sheibani in a Basra safe house, where they taught him and his associates how to assemble and use a new weapon the coalition would call the explosively formed penetrator.[37] According to a Hezbollah leader captured by the coalition in 2006, Hezbollah trained more than 250 of al-Sheibani's people at camps in Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon. As

these trainees filtered back to Iraq in summer 2006, the number of EFP incidents spiked dramatically.[38]

The coalition was already challenged by improvised explosive devices used by Sunni insurgents, but IEDs were crude in comparison to the EFP, which could penetrate tank armor. Most EFPs were triggered by infrared sensors (such as are used in automatic garage door mechanisms), which were unaffected by radio-frequency jammers employed by the coalition. One of the better descriptions of how an EFP worked: "The bomb that accomplished this feat looked like a large coffee can with a wide and precisely milled copper disc at one end. When activated by a passive infrared sensor, explosives in the can went off, propelling the disc forward and turning it into a slug of molten copper that lanced through heavy armor with ease."[39]

The classic asymmetric weapon, EFPs were relatively cheap to produce, notwithstanding the specialized machining the copper plate required. At an estimated fifty dollars per unit, EFPs were a lot less expensive than their intended targets, some of which, like the American M1A2 tank, cost millions of dollars to produce—not to mention the lives of their crews.[40] The Qods Force smuggled EFPs into Iraq under shipments of cement, food, cigarettes, and sheep. Another clever smuggling method was to bury EFP assemblies under shipments of uncooked fish; often the smell alone kept customs inspectors at bay.[41]

Not only were EFPs more lethal than their IED cousins, but the fact that they were almost exclusively used by Iraqi Shia insurgents posed another headache for the coalition. The Iraqi government, dominated by Shiite parties like SCIRI and Dawa, was reluctant to crack down on Shia groups. In fact, Baghdad often obstructed coalition efforts to apprehend the distributors and users of EFPs.[42]

Coalition perspectives on the EFP threat depended on one's proximity to it. From the soldier or Marine's standpoint, the impact might be described this way: "The IEDs are bad enough, but with the EFP there is apparently *zero* protection. No armor will save you, the devices are hard to detect, and existing jammers are ineffective against them. So why aren't the higher-ups doing anything about them? Why do some of our leaders downplay the Iranian role in EFP dissemination, even though I can read about them in *Time* magazine?"[43]

One echelon up were the giant American embassy in Baghdad and its consulates in other cities. While they were somewhat more distant from immediate scenes of EFP use, American diplomats in Iraq were not pulling any punches in cables to the State Department. An example from 2005: "The devastating effects of EFPs on Coalition Forces indicate that kinetic IRGC-QF [Qods Force] activity in Iraq is not limited to coercion or violence directed at indigenous political opponents, but also involves a nascent capability and *demonstrated willingness to target American lives*."[44]

The perspective at CENTCOM headquarters at MacDill Air Force Base in Florida was different still. There was no doubt that IEDs in general were having a serious impact on the morale and mobility of forces in Iraq. CENTCOM created new bureaucracies and techniques to mitigate the IED threat, although nothing was going to be 100 percent effective. If there was anything like a silver lining, it was that EFP use was limited to Shia extremist groups, who constituted a lesser threat to coalition operations. It was highly likely that Iran was manufacturing and shipping EFP assemblies to Iraq, but hard evidence was still lacking.[45] In any case, there were certainly different views on what Iran was doing in Iraq, at least in the 2004–2006 time frame.[46] One analyst would later write that "our leaders failed to recognize that a protracted insurgency was in the best interests of Iran."[47]

The issue of Iranian involvement in Iraq was equally contentious inside the Beltway. The State Department was hesitant to point fingers at Iran. There was no doubt that the failure to find Iraqi weapons of mass destruction made many analysts reluctant to assess that Iran was attacking Americans in Iraq.[48] Some highlighted Iran's provision of humanitarian aid to Iraq and deduced that Tehran desired stability in its neighbor. Others doubted Tehran would run the risk of sending EFPs to Iraq for fear of inviting American retaliation.

For the Washington policy maker there were other concerns as well. The intelligence community could take pride in "briefing truth to power," but policy makers could reply that it was they who had to decide what to do with that "truth." Equally annoying from their viewpoint was the inherent ambiguity of intelligence analysis for this theater: nothing could be proven, and precious little was definite. There were other considerations too. What if more of this intelligence leaked to the press? Would there be public

pressure to act?[49] Moreover, if public attention were focused on Iranian EFPs, might that not encourage Tehran to step up deliveries, having already caught Washington's attention?[50] Finally, what if Washington retaliated with military force against Iran? Might the Qods Force up the ante by attacking even more Americans in Iraq? Where would such escalation end?

Philip Zelikow, a senior adviser to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, was one of those senior policy makers who grappled with the EFP challenge. His conclusions were later described by Bob Woodward of the *Washington Post*: "Some evidence indicated the Iranian-backed terrorist group Hezbollah was training insurgents to build and use the shaped IEDs [EFPs], at the urging of the Iranian revolutionary guard corps. That kind of action was arguably an act of war against the United States. If we started putting out everything we knew about these things, Zelikow felt, the administration might well start a fire it couldn't put out."[51]

Given all this, it is hardly surprising that some policy makers demanded "solid proof" from the intelligence community before contemplating "kinetic" (i.e., lethal) responses. Posing such probing questions as the following, which the intelligence community had little likelihood of answering definitively, might at least buy such policy makers time:

- How certain are we that the Iranian government makes EFPs?
- Do we know for certain that the Qods Force *directly* provides EFPs and EFP components to Iraqi insurgents?
- Does the Iranian Supreme Leader approve of the Qods Force EFP project?
- Might this be a rogue operation on the part of "renegade" Revolutionary Guard officials?[52]

As it had been in the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing and the 1980s attacks on the American embassy and international peacekeepers in Beirut, Iran's hand was well concealed behind cutouts (see figure 6). It was highly unlikely that the CIA, or the National Security Agency were going to acquire a written (let alone oral) fatwa from Ali Khamenei authorizing Qassem Soleimani to execute operations that killed American and British

soldiers in Iraq. Unfortunately, that kind of intelligence comes to hand only in the movies.

Finally, there was the British perspective. Based as they were in southern Iraq and long preferred Iranian targets for historical reasons, the British were getting hit by EFPs too. Like their American counterparts, some British soldiers and Royal Marines sensed a disconnect between what they were seeing on the ground and what their superiors in London were saying. One British officer in 2006 may have been expressing a widespread sentiment when he said, "Iran is at war with us here, killing British soldiers, and nobody seems to care."[53] British intelligence (the MI6, or Secret Intelligence Service) was divided over Tehran's role in anticoalition violence: some believed the Iranian government was supplying EFPs to insurgents, but others were more cautious, citing the lack of evidence.[54]

Nonetheless, by summer 2006, the evidence of Iranian aid to Iraqi insurgents was piling up. The U.S. Army's forensics experts had focused on the copper disc that constituted the core of the EFP. It turned out that Iran was the only country in the region possessing the tools and expertise needed to manufacture it.[55]

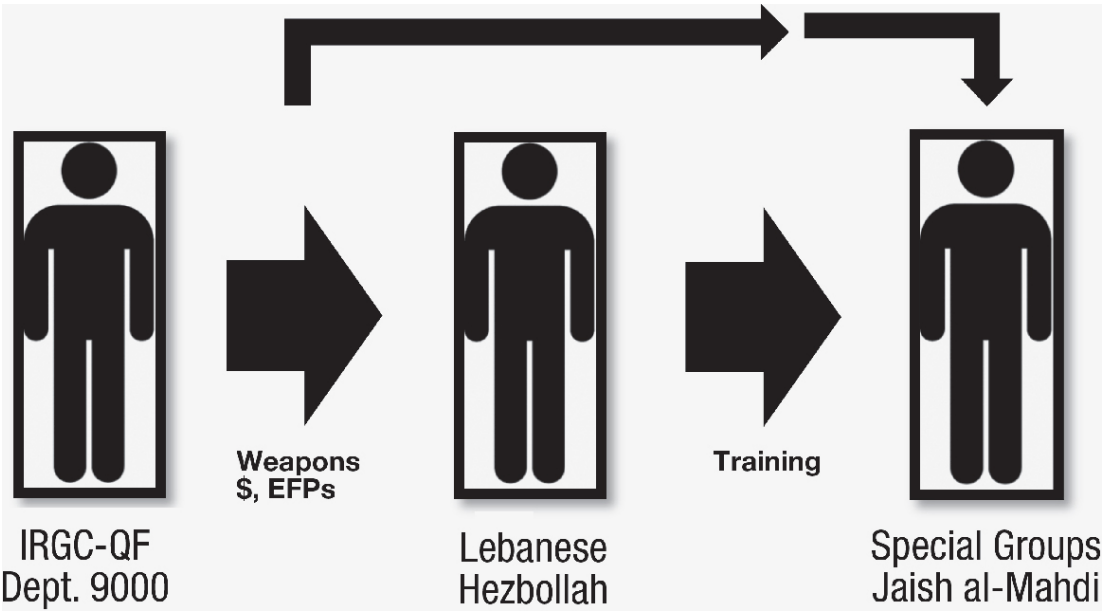

FIGURE 6. Qods Force Cutouts (Iraq EFP Campaign)

DIPLOMATIC WARNINGS

Until the fall of 2006, the U.S. government responded to the EFP problem through diplomatic warnings and press campaigns. On 19 July 2005 Washington passed a message to Tehran via the Swiss embassy, which represented American interests in Iran, noting the recent deaths of British soldiers in southern Iraq to EFPs. Such devices, the message warned, had been planted by an Iraqi Shiite militia with undeniable ties to the Qods Force. “We will continue to judge Iran by its action in Iraq,” the message concluded.[56] When the Iranians finally replied, it was to deny any knowledge of or responsibility for EFPs.[57]

Meanwhile, the use of EFPs on Iraqi battlefields increased exponentially. Between January and December 2006, EFP “incidents” increased by 150 percent over the previous year until they accounted for 30 percent of all American casualties in Iraq.[58] Unfortunately, the EFP story was drowned, as far as the American government and public was concerned, in a much larger debate about the role of the U.S. military in Iraq and whether a proposed troop surge could turn the tide. In the final analysis, it would be up to the soldiers to try to defeat the EFP threat on the ground.

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Task Force 17

Until summer 2006, the Iranian government received mixed messages from Washington. On the one hand, there were public statements by American officials asserting that Iran was playing a positive role in stabilizing Iraq, but others were alleging that the Qods Force provided lethal aid to Iraqi insurgents. Further complicating the picture was the fact that some Washington officials were questioning the validity of the reports of Qods Force meddling in Iraq. No matter how Iranian officials looked at it, American differences over how to deal with Iran in Iraq were unmistakable.

AL-KHAMENEI GROUPS

Meanwhile, Qods Force aid to Iraqi insurgents continued. Explosively formed penetrators represented only one aspect of Qassem Soleimani's phase two operations. By 2006 his men were funneling other arms to militant factions as well, such as PK machine guns, RPG-7 rocket-propelled grenades, mortars, and artillery rockets of various calibers.[1] The Qods Force's internal assessment of the loyalties and reliability of Iraqi militias apparently dictated the sophistication of the weapons each received. The al-Khamenei groups were deemed more reliable than others and as a result got better weapons. Among these groups we find the Sheibani Network and Kataib Hezbollah (Brigades of the Party of God). The latter, established in 2007 and led by Abu Mustafa al-Mohandis, an Iraqi veteran of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, was much smaller than Moqtada al-Sadr's Jaish al-Mahdi or Qais al-Khazali's Asaib Ahl al-Haq. But the Kataib's small size was one of the keys to its success; also, it was more internally

“compartmented” than the larger groups (i.e., members of subgroups were kept unaware of the activities of others and therefore unable to compromise them if captured), and its members practiced better operational security.[2] The Qods Force saved its most advanced weapons, however, for the Sheibani Network and Kataib Hezbollah: these included the Misagh-1 manportable air-defense system and the RPG-29 rocket-propelled grenade.[3]

For its part, the Qods Force kept its hand fairly well hidden by exercising good communications security and using Iraqi proxies. The Brigadier Shahlai managed arms supplies and training on the Iranian side of the border; once the weapons entered Iraq they were handled by smugglers, intimately familiar with the marshlands that straddle the frontier. It was up to the smugglers to ensure that the weapons reached the insurgents.[4]

COUNTERING IRANIAN INFLUENCE IN IRAQ

Notwithstanding the disjointedness of the U.S. information campaign against the Qods Force, by summer 2006 senior American officials were privately worried about Iran in Iraq. On 8 May the CENTCOM commander, Gen. John Abizaid, sent a classified memorandum to Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld that read, in part, “Mr. Secretary, Iran, specifically the Islamic Guard Corps–Quds Force, is providing lethal support to Shia militants conducting attacks against coalition forces in Iraq. While there is no evidence Quds Force provides specific targeting guidance, I believe Iran is fully aware of EFP use against coalition targets.”[5]

By that fall, the highest levels of the U.S. government were focusing on the Iranian challenge in Iraq. On 13 September 2006, the national security adviser, Stephen Hadley, chaired at the White House a “principals’ meeting” of the National Security Council (NSC)—that is, its statutory members, cabinet-level and other very senior agency heads, present in person—at which one topic on the agenda was Iranian actions in Iraq.[6] Not surprisingly, the Iranian nuclear program cast a long shadow over the debate. Previously undisclosed uranium-enrichment and plutoniumextraction facilities had been unveiled by an Iranian opposition group in 2002, and now, after several years of Iranian obstruction, the United States was trying to apply more sanctions. Many Iran experts

believed that increased violence against coalition forces in Iraq by Shiite militias was Tehran's response to pressure over the nuclear issue.[7]

The NSC principals agreed to several measures during this meeting. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Peter Pace, USMC, would, through CENTCOM develop a kinetic response to Iranian-instigated violence. In addition, an information operations campaign would be mounted spotlighting Iranian malfeasance in Iraq, including the EFP issue. The nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS *Dwight D. Eisenhower* (CVN 69) was ordered to the region as a demonstration of heightened American concern.[8]

A few weeks after the NSC meeting, the Joint Chiefs of Staff duly issued a directive to CENTCOM to plan military responses to Iran in Iraq. The Joint Staff's governing rubric was "contain, protect, and deter." The growing Iranian EFP threat must be contained and coalition forces protected from it, and Tehran needed to be deterred from escalating a conflict with the United States.[9] General Pace had been reluctant to spotlight publicly the Iranian threat in Iraq, reticence was not to be found in the Joint Chiefs of Staff order to CENTCOM: "Iran actively pursues activities that counter coalition interests in Iraq and Afghanistan through *support to proxy terrorist organizations and surrogate forces* to further its foreign policy goals and facilitate attacks outside of Iranian borders."[10]

By November the CENTCOM plan to thwart Iranian activities in Iraq had been presented to the secretary of defense and approved by the president. One essential element of that plan was capturing or killing Iranian operatives in Iraq who were targeting the coalition. The lead agency for this capture-or-kill policy was the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), based in Fort Bragg, North Carolina.[11]

From the beginning, JSOC was lukewarm about this new mission, "Countering Iranian Influence in Iraq." As it was, JSOC's Task Force 16 was already trying to neutralize the Iraqi Sunni insurgency and al-Qaeda in Iraq; going after the Qods Force too might dilute JSOC's essential focus on these. Furthermore, the Countering Iranian Influence effort was going to stress further surveillance assets and detention facilities already strained by the fight against the Sunni insurgency.[12] Finally, JSOC's leadership was understandably concerned about the political nature of the new mission: apprehending or killing Iranian operatives and their Iraqi surrogates was

going to generate pushback from an Iraqi government filled with Iranian allies. Indeed, as memoirs and other sources indicate, JSOC maintained a list of Iraqi Shia officials who were immune from capture for that reason.[13]

In the end, JSOC put together the staffing and structures to carry out the mission of countering Iranian influence. The JSOC's commander, Lt. Gen. Stanley McChrystal, established for the mission a separate, subordinate command that would eventually be called Task Force (TF) 17. At first it would be manned by the 5th Special Forces Group and SEAL Team 4, but by fall 2007 TF 17 would be run by the Army's 75th Ranger Regiment.[14]

Task Force 17's classified mission statement was terse and stripped of nuance: "TF 17 defeats IRGC-QF, their proxies and surrogate networks in Iraq [in order to] disrupt malign Iranian influence."[15] Like its cousin TF 16, the new unit would operate under General McChrystal's F3EA principle: "Find, Fix, Finish, Exploit, and Analyze."[16] To put it another way, TF 17 would kill, capture, or otherwise disrupt Qods Force networks in Iraq. It would rapidly exploit any intelligence captured in raids to roll up other Qods Force operatives and proxies before they could react. Intercepting EFPs before they reached the insurgents was a must. In addition, TF 17 would use information operations to drive a wedge between the Qods Force and its Iraqi allies.[17]

A STATE OF WAR?

One probable extension of the U.S. government's campaign to expose Iranian malfeasance in Iraq was a CBS *60 Minutes* interview with the CENTCOM commander, General Abizaid. The following excerpt from that interview spotlights the core issue in the internal American debate: *If Iran is providing lethal assistance to Iraqi insurgents, are we not in a state of war with Iran?*

Abizaid:	At the same time that the government of Iran is talking about stabilizing Iraq, these Revolutionary Guards Qods Force people are supporting the Shia death squads….
Lara Logan:	So, aren't we already at war with Iran through its proxies in Iraq?

Abizaid: No. We're not at war with Iran through its proxies. We are in a period of making it clear to the Iranians that they need to move to help stabilize Iraq and not destabilize it.

Logan: I know that's a political issue. But would you concede that Iranians are helping to kill American soldiers in Iraq?

Abizaid: I think that Iranians indirectly are working not only against our presence there, but also against the Iraqi government. …

Logan: Which at the end of the day means their money, their weapons are support—is helping to kill American soldiers in Iraq.

Abizaid: At the end of the day, the Iranian government is not working to stabilize Iraq. And they need to be.[18]

It was as close to the edge as General Abizaid was willing—or allowed—to go.

Iran merited a few words in George W. Bush's 10 January 2007 State of the Union address, a speech that was largely focused on other matters, including U.S. operations in Iraq: "Iran is providing material support for attacks on American troops. We will disrupt the attacks on our forces. We'll interrupt the flow of support from Iran and Syria. And we will seek out and destroy the networks providing advanced weaponry and training to our enemies in Iraq."[19] At the time of the president's speech, JSOC's Countering Iranian Influence operation was already several weeks old. TF 17 was not yet ready, and in the meantime JSOC had diverted to the Iranian fight existing, highly specialized resources from Task Force 16, including the Army's Delta Force and Seal Team 6. On 21 December 2006, a JSOC element monitoring cell phones owned by Qods Force operatives in Baghdad picked up calls it traced to Brigadier Mohsen Chizari, the head of Department 600 (Operations) and number-three in the Qods Force hierarchy.[20] Capturing him would send a powerful message to Tehran that Washington was serious about going after Iranian operatives.[21]

The first attempt to snatch Chizari failed. JSOC tracked two Mercedes sedans belonging to the Iranian embassy in Baghdad and intercepted the wrong one. (Four Iranians were detained in that incident, including the Revolutionary Guards' attaché to Iraq. All had diplomatic passports.)

Chizari was in the other vehicle and fled to a housing compound in Baghdad, where he holed up in a villa belonging to the Badr commander, Hadi al-Amari. At this point JSOC faced some of the anticipated political liabilities of going after Iran in Iraq: Brigadier Chizari was relocated but in a building owned by one of the leading political parties in the Iraqi government, where he apparently assumed he was safe as long as he stayed there.[22]

JSOC raided al-Amari's compound anyway and detained ten suspects. At least six of these were Badr Organization members, but the other four were Iranian, including Brigadier Chizari, Col. Reza Diyanati (Chizari's deputy in Department 600), and the Qods Force station chief in Dubai. A good deal of material was seized too and was exploited on-site by JSOC translators and analysts to generate new missions.[23] Among the documents obtained were "detailed weapons lists, documents pertaining to shipments of weapons into Iraq, organizational charts, telephone records and maps."[24]

As expected, the apprehension of senior Qods Force officers triggered an Iranian diplomatic protest. More relevant for the United States, though, was that it was paralleled by a full-court press against the Iraqi government. As one Iraqi official told American journalist Dexter Filkins, "It is very difficult for us to say no to Soleimani. When we say no, he makes trouble for us. Bombings. Shootings. The Iranians are our neighbors. They've always been there, and they always will be. We have to deal with them."[25]

Washington could dismiss Iranian complaints, but it could not easily ignore the Iraqis. Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, a Dawa Party stalwart, was said to be "furious" at the American raid; he demanded that the United States hand over the captives immediately.[26] President Jalal Talabani, another Qods Force contact, said the detained Iranians were in Iraq at his invitation.[27] The Americans stalled for time: the detainees with diplomatic accreditation papers were released, but Brigadier Chizari and a few others were held.[28] An unidentified American official sought to justify the raids on the following grounds: "It is our position that the Iraqis have to seize this opportunity to sort out with the Iranians just what kind of behavior they are going to tolerate.They are going to have to confront the evidence that the Iranians are deeply involved in some of the acts of violence."[29]

On 29 December, Chizari and his lieutenants were released into Iraqi custody. The sole American condition was that they leave Iraq immediately.

But JSOC's Countering Iranian Influence operation was just starting to hit its stride.[30]

IRBIL RAID

The second raid took place in the northern Iraqi city of Irbil on 11 January 2007. American intelligence had reports that a senior Qods Force team visiting Kurdish politicians was being led by Qassem Soleimani himself, along with IRGC Brigadier Mohammed Jafari (then deputy chairman of the Supreme Council for National Security and future IRGC commander), Brigadier Foruzandeh of the Ramazan Corps, and Lt. Col. Mahmud Farhadi of the Zafar Command.[31] The Qods Force delegation was making the rounds of the two main Iraqi Kurdish parties, both of which had prominent roles in the Iraqi government. Their first stop was the Iranian consulate in Soleimaniya, a city run by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. The second was going to be the consulate in Irbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Democratic Party's enclave.[32]

A JSOC team of operators from the Delta Force raided the Irbil consulate and snatched five alleged Qods Force officers, but neither Soleimani nor Jafari were among them. Nor, for that matter, were the Qods Force colonels in charge of the two consulates or Lieutenant Colonel Farhadi, all of whom were in a KDP safe house at the time of the raid. The JSOC team did capture phones, computers, and documents, which one of the detainees had tried to flush down a toilet.[33] A U.S. military statement after the seizure attempted to fend off the coming storm of criticism from both the Iranian and Iraqi governments: "Preliminary results revealed the five detainees are connected to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards–Quds Force (IRGC-QF), an organization known for providing funds, weapons, improvised explosive devices (IED) technology and training to extremist groups attempting to destabilize the government of Iraq and attack Coalition forces."[34]

The statement did little to blunt the reproaches from Tehran and Baghdad. The Iranian foreign ministry protested that the detainees were accredited diplomats assigned to the Iranian consulate in Irbil.[35] The United States replied that they were not accredited, since the "consulate" had no diplomatic status.[36] For his part, the KDP leader, Masood Barzani, who was

hosting the Iranians at the time of the raid, insisted on the legitimacy of the Iranian visitors: “It was not a secret Iranian office. It is impossible for us to accept that an Iranian office in Irbil was doing things against the coalition forces or against us. That office was doing its work in a normal way and had they been doing anything hostile, we would have known that. There was an Iranian delegation, including Revolutionary Guards commanders, and they came as guests of our President [Jalal Talabani].”[37]

The American ambassador to Baghdad, Zalmay Khalilzad, emphasized the accreditation issue in meetings with Iraqi Prime Minister al-Maliki, President Talabani, and Vice President Adel Abdel-Mahdi. The Qods Force was not an “appropriate interlocutor” for the Iraqi government, Khalilzad argued; valid interstate diplomacy required responsible state actors, not semiclandestine outfits engaged in covert action. The United States would not tolerate diplomatically accredited Qods Force officers holding routine diplomatic negotiations with the Iraqi government on the one hand while killing Americans on the other.[38] “It is inappropriate for you,” the American ambassador chided Jalal Talabani, “the president of Iraq, to be meeting clandestinely with an Iranian intelligence officer.”[39] Furthermore, Khalilzad warned, if Iran continued to send EFPs into Iraq, Washington would retaliate.[40]

The Iraqi government was caught between the proverbial rock and hard place. Both the United States and Iran were pressuring Baghdad to be more assertive with the other, and yet the Iraqis could ill afford to alienate either. In late January, the Iraqi foreign minister told the Iranian ambassador (and Qods Force officer) Kazemi-Qomi that Iran-Iraq relations needed to be formalized so that future disagreements over the status of Iranian consular facilities could be avoided. Iraq would grant Iran’s offices in Irbil and Suleimaniya consular status in return for Iraqi consulates in Mashhad and Ahvaz. All future state-to-state relations would have to be conducted under the aegises of their respective foreign ministries.[41] The subtext of Iraq’s communication to Iran was clear: the old ways of doing business, such as separate talks between Qods Force officers and their Iraqi friends, should end. But Tehran had no intention of accommodating Baghdad’s request. Instead Iranian agents would continue to undermine the Iraqi government’s authority by seeking out individual Iraqi officials with whom they had the most leverage, regardless of official rank.

JSOC’s two raids on Qods Force operatives in Iraq did catch Qassem Soleimani’s attention. He pulled some Qods Force officers out of Iraq, pending a review of security procedures. More emphasis was placed on Hezbollah’s role as the spear tip of Iran’s covert-action program in Iraq. The Irbil and Soleimaniya consulates were temporarily shuttered, although the Qods Force–dominated consulates in Basra and Karbala remained open for business.[42]

Qassem Soleimani intended to retaliate for JSOC’s detention of his people. The Iranian government had to drive home to the Americans that it had interests in Iraq that it was willing to defend. Retaliation in some manner was also vital to Iran’s ability to deter the United States from escalating tensions, whether over the EFP issue or the nuclear program. Soleimani had plans up his sleeve for just this kind of contingency: the Qods Force would retaliate via a proxy, but Iran’s hand would be, by design, unmistakable. Brigadier Shahlai of Department 9000 would run the operation using Hezbollah as a cutout. A Hezbollah officer, Ali Musa Daqduq, would handle the planning and the deception aspects. The action agent was Qais al-Khazali’s Asaib Ahl al-Haq.[43]

15

Undeclared Covert War

By early 2007, the United States was at war with the Islamic Republic of Iran. It was an undeclared war, fought mostly in the shadows with instruments like the Joint Special Operations Command and the Qods Force. JSOC brought formidable assets to this fight, including superb training, a slimmed-down decision-making process, advanced weapons systems, and cutting-edge sensor technology. The Qods Force's primary strengths lay in its lethal Iraqi proxies, proximity to the Iraqi battlefield, clandestine operators steeped in Iraqi culture, and pure grit. Throughout 2007, the two sides vied to gain and retain the initiative.

SOLEIMANI'S REVENGE

Qassem Soleimani, the commander of the Qods Force, was determined to exact revenge for the capture and brief detention of his subordinate Mohsen Chizari in December 2006. He also wanted hostages of his own to trade for the release of the Iranians captured in the January 2007 Irbil raid. The intended target of Qods Force retaliation was the Provincial Joint Construction Center (PJCC) in Karbala.

Qods Force and Hezbollah officers had already been conducting discreet surveillance of the PJCC for weeks. It was standard practice for the Qods Force to keep several action plans on the shelf, and the Karbala PJCC was one such contingency. A rough composite model of the PJCC compound reportedly was constructed in Iran against which the Iraqi "snatch squad" trained. All in all, it was a well-planned and -executed operation.[1]

On 20 January, at around six o'clock in the evening, a fleet of eight black GMC Suburban SUVs approached the PJCC. The vehicles were carefully disguised to resemble the cars used by American civilians and soldiers, with tinted windows and fake CREW (counter-IED) antennae. Inside each SUV were between eight and twelve men, many of whom wore American-style camouflage and carried copies of M-4 assault rifles. These measures convinced the Iraqi gate guards to wave them through to the inner sanctum of the courtyard, where the Americans were holding a meeting.[2]

The first part of the raid went according to plan. The assault team attacked both entrances of the target building simultaneously, killing one American soldier, wounding three, and abducting four more. Meanwhile, other members of the assault force disabled or destroyed the American Humvees to forestall a pursuit. With their captives stashed in the SUVs, the assault force made its escape.[3]

Then things began to go wrong for the abductors. When they drove past an Iraqi police checkpoint without stopping, they triggered a regionwide police chase. Eventually, as the police net tightened, the attackers aborted their mission. At around nine o'clock that night five of the SUVs were discovered abandoned by the side of the road some twenty-five miles from the PJCC. Three of the captives were found dead, killed by bullets to their heads. The fourth, barely alive when discovered, died on the way to the hospital.[4]

In the immediate aftermath of the PJCC attack, the American command tried to find out who the perpetrators were and how they had penetrated a secure compound. Perhaps anticipating that Washington would blame his Qods Force, Qassem Soleimani sent a message to the American ambassador via Iraqi president Talabani: "I swear on the grave of Khomeini I haven't authorized a bullet against the U.S."[5] It's doubtful the Americans believed Soleimani's denials; the sophistication of the attack and its meticulous preparation and execution all pointed to a state actor instead of an Iraqi insurgent group.

EFPS AND COIN

As the investigation of the Karbala attack proceeded, the United States ramped up its information campaign against the Qods Force. On 9 February,

the *New York Times* published an article based on a "still classified" 2006 intelligence report.[6] The article quoted lines from that assessment verbatim, including, "All source reporting since 2004 indicates that Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps—Qods Force is providing professionally-built EFPs and components to Iraqi Shia militants."[7] American "forensic analysis," the article continued, indicated that Iran had produced at least some of the materials involved in making EFPs. Whoever had leaked the assessment wanted to preempt the line of argument that senior Iranian leaders might be unaware of their subordinates' activities in Iraq: "Iran is implementing a deliberate, calibrated policy—*approved by Supreme Leader Khamenei and carried out by the Quds Force*—to provide explosives support and training to select Iraqi Shia militant groups to conduct attacks against Coalition targets."[8]

That same *New York Times* article quoted a U.S. Army officer commanding an infantry battalion in the greater Baghdad region: "Every time we crack down on Shia militias that weapon [EFP] comes out. They want to keep us on our bases, keep us out of their neighborhoods, and prevent us from doing our main mission, which is protecting vulnerable portions of the population."[9] If we put these remarks in the counterinsurgency (COIN) lexicon of the time, the Iranians and their proxies were using the EFP to force coalition forces to "up armor" (add more layers of protection), concentrate on large bases behind HESCO barriers (assembled from commercial, rapidly deployable gabions filled with sand), and so prevent the coalition from winning the "hearts and minds" of the local population. In this way, an Iranian tactic (employing EFPs) was having a noticeable impact on the operational and even strategic levels of the war.

U.S. DEBATE CONTINUES

The PJCC attack came in the middle of a White House debate over Iran's role in destabilizing Iraq. As we have seen, the latest round of discussion began in September 2006, with a National Security Council meeting that spurred the creation of JSOC's Task Force 17 and a campaign to publicize the Iranian threat in the media. So far, though, most of the press stories had focused on either Washington, DC, or CENTCOM headquarters.[10] On 11

February 2007, the Baghdad press corps was given a briefing on EFPs by three anonymous "DoD [Department of Defense] intelligence officers." In addition to the standard PowerPoint presentation, the briefing included material exhibits of EFP canisters and copper discs allegedly made in—or at least linked to—the Iranian government.[11]

The gist of the presentation ran along what were by now familiar lines: the Qods Force provided arms and other lethal assistance to Iraqi insurgents. The weapons and explosives entered Iraq through three primary smuggling routes: via Mehran, Amara, and Basra. To date, Iranian-supplied EFPs had killed 170 Americans and wounded 620 others. The "precision machining" necessary to make some of the EFP assemblies was a reliable intelligence signature that strongly pointed to Iran. The Qods Force was an entity of the Iranian government that took "its orders from the Supreme Leader." The preferred Qods Force modus operandi was to use proxies as cutouts to disguise Iran's hand in attacks on coalition forces.[12]

This presentation triggered a new round of controversy inside the U.S. government, and much of it revolved around the same question that CBS correspondent Lara Logan had asked General Abizaid only months before: If Iranian government–sanctioned violence against U.S. forces in Iraq was occurring, was this not a declaration of war against the United States? The question certainly was a minefield for the intelligence briefers. If they said yes, then the logical follow-up questions would be: Why isn't the U.S. government doing something about this? What should the U.S. military do to stop Iranian-directed attacks on American forces in Iraq?[13]

The analysts at the briefing danced around the question as best they could, but this war-versus-peace question could only be handled by senior U.S. government policy makers. The secretary of defense, Robert Gates, still new to the job, pleaded ignorance: "I'm just frankly not specifically certain myself of the—of the details."[14] The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Pace, no stranger to the EFP controversy, emphasized the ambiguity in the intelligence: the fact that the weapons were Iranian in origin didn't necessarily mean that the Iranian government was aware of their distribution to Iraqi insurgents. The chairman added that the analysts should have been "precise" in distinguishing between "facts" and opinions. The bottom line, as he saw it, was that the evidence "does not translate to

… [certainty that] the Iranian government per se, for sure, is directly involved in doing this."[15]

The EFP controversy boiled up again in a 14 February press conference by President Bush. Pressed by reporters about Iranian activities in Iraq, the president responded, "What we do know is that the Quds Force was instrumental in providing those deadly IEDs to networks inside of Iraq. We know that. And we also know that the Quds Force is a part of the Iranian government. What we don't know is whether or not the head leaders of Iran ordered the Quds Force to do what they did."[16]

But the president's attempt to thread a very thin needle only added fuel to the fire. During a Pentagon press conference the following day, both Secretary Gates and General Pace were prodded further on the linkages between Iran's senior leadership and the actions of the Qods Force—which, as the president had pointed out the day before, was "a part of the Iranian government." Pace downplayed any daylight between his and the president's position: "What I tried to say when I said that I didn't know about the Iranian government, I'm talking about the two or three people in the government. I cannot, we do not have proof that the senior leadership in Iran is directing these activities in Iraq. And I was trying to be very precise about what the facts are and what conclusions are."[17]

Ultimately, what was at stake in the American debate was whether or not the intelligence community possessed "smoking gun" evidence in the form of a written order or an intercepted phone call by the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, explicitly authorizing Qassem Soleimani to send EFPs to Iraq with the expressed purpose of killing Americans. What the intelligence agencies did possess—forensics of EFPs and interrogations of Iranian and Iraqi detainees—was not going to prove "beyond the shadow of a doubt" that Ali Khamenei had greenlighted Qods Force violence against U.S. forces in Iraq.

THE BASRA RAID

While Washington debated Iranian complicity, the Joint Special Operations Command fought Iran's campaign of destabilization of Iraq. Task Force 17 was deemed mission-capable by mid-February, and its first target was going to be those responsible for the Karbala assault, which killed five Americans.

On 20 March, a TF 17 team composed of American and British forces captured three men in the southern Iraqi city of Basra. The first was Qais al-Khazali, the leader of the Iranian-backed special group Asaib Ahl al-Haq (or AAH, League of the Righteous). The second was his brother Laith, also of AAH, while the third was a "middle aged Arab man" whom the interrogators dubbed "Hamid the Mute," because he was apparently deaf. Hamid the Mute was of very limited value to his interrogators for the first four weeks—ample time, it turned out, for the man's associates to learn of his capture and hide their tracks. As Hamid the Mute himself later confessed to his interrogators, he was far from deaf. Moreover, his real name was Ali Musa Daqduq, he was a Hezbollah adviser to the Iraqi special groups, a key intermediary between them and the Qods Force, and, as we saw in the last chapter, the lead planner of the Karbala attack.[18]

In addition to the Khazali brothers and Ali Musa Daqduq, TF 17 operators seized computers and documentation. Upon exploitation, these provided additional clues to AAH's role in the attack. A photo identification card of one of the slain American soldiers was found, as well as a picture of the wife and family of another. Most damning of all, however, was a twenty-two-page after-action report detailing the planning for the Karbala raid and the lessons learned from it.[19] Lieutenant General McChrystal would later call this report a "smoking gun" that "showed clear support of their [i.e., the Khazali brothers'] network from the Iranian Quds Force."[20]

THE BRITISH TARGET

JSOC's Countering Iranian Influence campaign posed some obvious security risks for the United Kingdom. British forces were deployed in southern Iraq, where Tehran's influence was strongest, and force protection had become London's preeminent concern. The problem was not only that EFPs were being used by Iraqi Shia militants but also because public opinion at home had soured on the war. The British government and military, for their parts, did not want to be dragged by Washington into another regional war, only this time against a more powerful opponent, Iran. Not only did London lack the forces in-theater to deter Tehran, but it was doubtful if the British could escalate a conflict with Iran if the latter chose to up the ante. Iran was certainly aware of these British weaknesses, and the

temptation to inflict more pain and humiliation on an old adversary must have been very great.[21]

On 23 March 2007, barely three days after the TF 17 raid netted the Khazali brothers and Daqduq in Basra, the Iranians struck back. The IRGC navy captured a Royal Navy patrol craft in the Shatt al-Arab. On board were eight sailors and seven Royal Marines, whose release was contingent on the release of the Khazalis. Eventually, the British captives were released on 4 April without the coalition making any obvious moves to reciprocate. But Iran had sent a message: it would retaliate for the apprehension of its friends in Iraq, and its preferred target would be the United Kingdom. The action/reaction cycle was not over yet.[22]

On 29 May 2007, Asaib Ahl al-Haq operatives conducted another abduction raid; this time the target was a group of British informationtechnology contractors who were installing accounting software on computers owned by the Iraqi Finance Ministry. The AAH employed many of the tactics used in the Karbala PJCC raid, such as fitting up Toyota Land Cruisers to resemble those used by various Iraqi security forces. The abductors seized five British nationals at gunpoint: a computer expert named Peter Moore and four of his bodyguards. In a ransom note Asaib Ahl al-Haq demanded the release of the Khazali brothers as well as of all other AAH detainees held by the coalition. They also demanded a British military withdrawal from Iraq.[23]

Where the British nationals were held is still something of a mystery. The British Foreign Office issued a statement years later that sought to distance the Iranian government from the abductions: “We can’t be absolutely sure where they were for every single one of the days of their two-and-a-half years of captivity. But we are pretty clear *there is no firm evidence that links Iran directly with the kidnappings*.”[24] Yet the American commander of coalition forces, Gen. David Petraeus, told the BBC that he was “90 percent certain” that the British hostages were held in Iran.[25]

An extensive investigation into the abduction by the *Guardian* seemed to reinforce General Petraeus’ account. After interviewing multiple witnesses, including Iraqi National Intelligence Service (INIS) officers, former members of Iran’s Revolutionary Guards, and an Iraqi official who said he had negotiated Peter Moore’s release, the *Guardian* concluded that the Qods Force had been “heavily involved” in the abductions and that the

British nationals had been detained in Qods Force camps in Iran.[26] One unnamed Whitehall official emphasized the broader political implications of the kidnappings: if the *Guardian*'s account was true, then the abduction of Moore and the others had been "tantamount to acts of war."[27]

In a sense, the Iranian covert war against the coalition and JSOC's response to it were collectively a danse macabre, the two protagonists dueling in the shadows, sometimes straying close to the thin, fine line between war and peace. How much pain the other side was willing to endure before escalating with military force was a delicate and careful assessment that, of course, left plenty of room for miscalculation. What was not in doubt was the ultimate fate of the British captives: Peter Moore was released in 2009 in exchange for Qais al-Khazali, the ringleader of Asaib Ahl al-Haq. But Moore's bodyguards had been executed by their captors; their bodies were eventually returned in exchange for Laith al-Khazali and other detainees.[28]

TASK FORCE 17 SUCCESSES

In bringing the Peter Moore story to its conclusion, we have gone a little ahead of ourselves. Back in May 2007, when Moore and his bodyguards were first abducted, the U.S.-Iran covert war was in high gear. When Task Force 17 began making its presence known to Iran's Iraqi surrogates, some of them fled to Iran. Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani, the leader of an Iraqi Shia militant network that was using EFPs against the coalition, deemed it prudent to lie low in Iran until the JSOC campaign petered out.[29] Furthermore, in a briefing of 1 August 2007 to the National Security Council, General Petraeus cited intelligence suggesting that Hezbollah had pulled its people out of Iraq after Ali Musa Daqduq's capture.[30]

Task Force 17 was all this time accomplishing another of its objectives too: motivating the Iraqi government to pressure Tehran about its meddling in Iraq. In early August, Iraqi prime minister Nuri al-Maliki went to Tehran and met with the usual constellation of leaders with stakes in his own country: Supreme Leader Khamenei, President Mahmud Ahmadinejad, Ali Larijani (the speaker of the parliament), and Qassem Soleimani. One of the publicly enunciated reasons for Maliki's visit was to seek Iranian help in tamping down the violence that was engulfing Iraq.[31] Accompanying Maliki

was his minister of state for national security, Shirwan Waeli, a man with close Qods Force connections.[32] On returning to Baghdad, Waeli sought a meeting with General Petraeus to pass a message from Soleimani—that he, as the Qods Force commander, was the primary authority on Iranian policy toward Iraq. Petraeus declined the message and asked Waeli to inform Soleimani that "Iran has overreached and is on the brink of attracting international isolation." Petraeus also warned Soleimani "that I am considering telling the President that I believe Iran is, in fact, waging war on the U.S. in Iraq, with all of the U.S. public and government responses that could come from that revelation."[33]

Whether as a result of the messages sent by Task Force 17 and General Petraeus or of Nuri al-Maliki's visit to Tehran, the number of EFP incidents in Iraq shrank, from a high of ninety-nine in July to fifty-three by October 2007.[34] In early November the U.S. government, in an apparent quid pro quo, announced that it would release nine of the twenty Iranian nationals it held. A spokesman for the U.S. military put a finer point on what the Americans now expected of Iran: "We hope in the coming weeks and months to confirm that Iran has indeed honored its pledge through further verification that the flow of munitions and other lethal aid has stopped."[35]

In those same months TF 17 rolled up another Qods Force officer. The target this time was Lt. Col. Mahmud Farhadi, an officer with considerable experience working with Iraqi Kurds, narrowly escaping capture in the January 2007 Irbil raid. On 20 September TF 17 caught up with him in the northern Iraqi city of Soleimaniya.[36] Iran reacted by insisting he was a legitimate trade representative to Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and by closing five major border crossings between the KRG's territory and northern Iran.[37] Once again, the Iraqi government found itself caught in a crisis pitting its two most important allies against each other. President Talabani predictably insisted on Farhadi's bona fides, but the Americans argued he was a Qods officer in charge of the Zafar Command.[38] A coalition spokesman said that "multiple sources implicate Farhadi in providing weapons to Iraqi criminal elements and surrogates of Iran. We also know that for more than a decade he was involved in Iranian intelligence operations in Iraq."[39]

By year's end JSOC could take stock of its campaign against the Qods Force in Iraq. Clearly TF 17 was having an impact on the Qods Force's

modus operandi. But Qassem Soleimani's organization was adaptable too, and it adjusted the level of violence it would sponsor in Iraq corresponding to JSOC's pressure. Moreover, the Qods Force had demonstrated that it would go after hostages in response to TF 17 raids. The key problem for the coalition, which no amount of JSOC expertise could address, was that Iran was playing a "long game" in Iraq while the coalition was not. Notwithstanding every TF 17 tactical capture of a Qods Force officer, Tehran was slowly, irrevocably gaining influence and power over Iraq. Nowhere were these gains more obvious than in southern Iraq, the Shia homeland.

16

Overlord of Iraq

Southern Iraq, with its teeming cities, oil wealth, tribes, shrines, strategic location, and Arab Shia majority received a disproportionate share of Iran's time, attention, and resources after 2003. As Iran's primary agent for setting and implementing policy toward Iraq, the Qods Force was especially active in the south, where it manipulated multiple parties for leverage and influence. Iran's long-term objective was a weakened Iraqi government beholden to Tehran for security and economic support. The primary strategy for achieving this was divide and conquer, combined with a judicious use of Iraqi proxies.

MACHIAVELLI REVISITED

Tehran's declared policy was ensuring a stable, united Iraq, but Qods Force actions hinted at a far more subtle and sophisticated approach. We have already seen how the Qods Force stoked anticoalition and anti-Baghdad violence by arming and training the Jaish al-Mahdi and the special groups. At the same time, the Qods Force was directing an assassination campaign by the JAM and other groups against Saddam-era officers, provincial governors, police chiefs, and judges.[1] With Machiavellian statecraft, the Qods Force offered to mediate and resolve the violence among Iraqis that it had helped instigate. Ultimately, Iran wanted *all* of the Iraqi players, but especially the Shia, to make their way to Tehran so that Qassem Soleimani could magnanimously help them solve their disputes.

Of course, Iran could not ignore the coalition, still a major impediment to Tehran's regional ambitions. As long as American forces remained on the

ground in Iraq, the potential scope of Iran's hegemony would be limited. Using EFPs to kill American and British soldiers was a high-risk strategy but, realistically, the best Iran had to force its enemies out of Iraq. The risk, of course, lay in the possible American responses to EFP use. The Iranians no doubt picked up Washington's signals that too many EFPs in Iraq might trigger a U.S. military response against Iran. Yet by eliminating the flow of EFPs Iran would deny itself leverage over the Americans and possibly encourage a U.S. attack on Iran over its nuclear program. Therefore, the supply of EFPs had to be carefully calibrated to extract maximum influence at minimum cost to Iran itself.

The coalition was slow to react to the EFP threat, but once it did, by creating Task Force 17, the Qods Force was forced to scale back parts of its Iraq program. The number of EFP incidents dropped by fall 2007 (as noted in chapter 15), but there was no guarantee that the Qods Force wouldn't ramp them up again as conditions in Iraq changed or American rhetoric against Iran increased.[2] It was a fine balance.

INTERCEPTING EFPS

In 2006 and 2007, both the Americans and British were emphasizing border security to choke off the flow of EFPs from Iran to Iraq. As one American military intelligence officer put it in 2009, "Everything that happens here in Baghdad or Mosul by the sectarian Shiite groups is all tied to Iran—you have to cut the threads that tie them, and almost all of them start here."[3] But interdiction in southern Iraq was made difficult by the marshes that straddle the border. They made for a notorious safe haven for smugglers, and the Qods Force had decades of experience working with these people.

One coalition approach was building forward operating bases (FOBs) close to the Iranian border for close monitoring and interdiction of crossborder traffic. The Joint Special Operations Command too operated in Maysan, Basra, and Wasit Provinces; one of its tactics to combat arms smuggling was to give the Iranians a taste of their own medicine. The device, dubbed the "X Box," was essentially an improvised explosive device that was command-detonated when a known arms caravan was passing nearby.[4]

The border FOBs also enabled the coalition to step up signals-intelligence collection on Iran. Yet, despite all these measures, American diplomats concluded in 2010 that most cross-border traffic could not be monitored. The lack of Iraqi border police was one hurdle, but the reliability of electronic surveillance equipment turned out to be another. Since most of the southern Iraqi provinces depended on Iran's electricity grid, the Qods Force only had to "throw the switch" and disable border cameras whenever it wanted to send a weapons shipment across.[5]

To make matters worse for the coalition, in autumn 2007 the British were preparing to hand over Basra to the Iraqi government. Indeed, by the end of that year nine Iraqi provinces were transferred to the government's uncertain hands, and many of those were in the south. The Iraqi security forces were not prepared to fill the vacuum created by the departing coalition, and the result was a power struggle between Muqtada al-Sadr's JAM and the Badr Organization.[6]

MANAGED VIOLENCE

The diversity of Shia militias in places like Basra was a mixed blessing for the Qods Force. On the one hand, the Iranians could play the Iraqi groups against each other for Tehran's benefit. This dovetailed with the broader Qods Force strategy of having some Shia parties, like the Badr Organization and Dawa, participate in the Iraqi government while at the same time other Shia organizations, such as the JAM and special groups, attacked coalition forces to weaken their resolve. The strategy had its drawbacks, though: Iran's multiple Shia clients inevitably clashed with each other over the Iraqi spoils, and the Qods Force occasionally discovered that "managed" violence was not always easy to manage.[7] In the end, by supporting competing factions, the Qods Force undermined whatever residual trust Iraqis had in Iranian intentions.

In spring 2008, some of the weaknesses of the Qods Force's strategy came into sharper perspective. A series of intra-Shia power struggles broke out across central and southern Iraq. On one side were the establishment parties, like the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI, what had been the SCIRI), the Badr Organization (which had broken away from ISCI), and the Dawa. On the other was an array of parties and armed groups, from the

JAM and 15th Shaaban to the Asaib Ahl al-Haq. The conflicts were intensified by the special groups, and it was unclear who ultimately controlled *them*.[8]

Iran's links to the Sadrists and the special groups were known to the Iraqi leadership from both their own intelligence sources and the Americans. Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, who had decades of experience dealing with the Iranians, knew better than most what kind of game Tehran was playing in his country. As he told the American ambassador, Ryan Crocker, "You can't know what arrogance is until you are an Iraqi Arab forced to take refuge with the Iranians."[9] Repeated meetings with Iranian officials from Supreme Leader Khamenei on down only confirmed Maliki's instincts. As for Qassem Soleimani, he shared his assessment with another American official: "He follows Khamenei's line completely and without Khamenei he would be nothing."[10]

CHARGE OF THE KNIGHTS

In March 2008, Nuri al-Maliki's patience with blatant Iranian interference in his country was sorely tested when special groups fired artillery rockets into Baghdad's Green Zone (or International Zone, a secured area where Iraqi government and, especially, U.S. facilities were concentrated). Prime Minister Maliki decided that it was time to neutralize the JAM once and for all; on 25 March, ten thousand Iraqi security troops were unleased on Jaish forces in Basra. This operation, known as Charge of the Knights, caught off guard both the Americans and Qassem Soleimani, who sent a warning to Maliki not to conduct operations near the Iranian border.[11]

Over the course of the next few days, Iraqi security forces uncovered caches of weapons made in Iran and only recently. But vanquishing the JAM proved harder than either Maliki or his generals had anticipated. Iraqi forces were soon bogged down in urban warfare, where their numbers and firepower were negated by an enemy that fought among the civilian population.[12]

Ever the opportunist, Qassem Soleimani took advantage of Maliki's woes to insert himself into the conflict. On 28 March, Soleimani met with Iraqi president Jalal Talabani on the Iran-Iraq border and accepted Talabani's request to mediate the Basra standoff.[13] The following day, an

Iraqi government delegation consisting of Muwaffaq al-Rubai, Hadi al-Amari, and Ali al-Dib, flew to Tehran and met with Soleimani. They had come with two requests: that Soleimani pressure Muqtada al-Sadr into accepting a cease-fire and that the Qods Force supply no more weapons to the JAM or the special groups.[14] Soleimani used his leverage to mediate between Moqtada al-Sadr and the Iraqi government a cease-fire that went into effect on 30 March. Notable in this episode was how quickly the fighting stopped when the Iranians wanted it to. After years of Iranian training and weapons, the Jaish al-Mahdi's fighting capabilities had improved, especially in the areas of tactics, leadership, and communications. At the same time, though, the Qods Force had gained enough influence over the JAM that it could force a cease-fire on it.[15]

Qassem Soleimani's manipulation of Iraqi politics was on full display also during another meeting with Jalal Talabani on 4 April. The Qods Force commander declared that Iran was "deeply concerned" by the recent incursion of the Iraqi army into Basra and the fierce resistance this had sparked. "We all must work together," Soleimani added, "Iraq, Iran, and the United States—to stabilize the situation," since the Sadrists were "outside anyone's control." Soleimani asked Talabani to pass a message to the Americans (this one accepted and read). "Dear General Petraeus," it began, "you should know that I, Qassem Soleimani, control the policy of Iran with respect to Iraq, Lebanon, Gaza and Afghanistan." Soleimani added that he was ready to "discuss any issue" with the U.S. government but that Washington should sweeten the deal by handing over members of the Iranian opposition group, the Mojahedin-e Khalq.[16]

In his weekly summary to Secretary of Defense Gates, Petraeus passed on the gist of Soleimani's message, with the observation that "the most sobering surprise of the week, was probably the extent of direct Iranian involvement in Iraqi political intrigue."[17] Ambassador Crocker got to the heart of the matter in a separate cable to Washington: "The message, taken from the Syrian-Iranian playbook in Lebanon, is that *Iran can solve problems and create them*."[18]

The Basra episode, although it was sparked by Prime Minister Maliki's spur-of-the-moment decision to crush the Sadrists, revealed that the Qods Force was arming multiple Iraqi factions at the same time. When those factions clashed over turf and influence, the Qods Force was in a good

position to force a settlement beneficial to Iranian interests. But arming and training Iraqi Shia militias was only one facet of Qassem Soleimani's strategy: shaping the Iraqi government, at all levels from the national level down to the municipalities, was another.

KINGMAKER

When the coalition invaded Iraq in 2003, its declared goal was to hold free and fair elections for Iraq's new government. For Iran, the prospect of Iraqi democracy, however flawed in practice, posed both risks and opportunities. One risk was that any election might produce such unexpected and undesirable results as a victory by parties not beholden to Tehran or the creation of ruling coalitions that might complicate Iranian influence peddling. Another worry was that a successful democratic process in Iraq might inspire Iranians to demand the same for their country. At the same time, Qassem Soleimani and his subordinates had a superb humanintelligence network with which to infiltrate a new Iraqi government and plenty of levers at their disposal to manipulate it, including cash disbursements and outright intimidation. Specifically, the Qods Force would use its Iraqi allies in government to impede any attempt by the United States to restrict Iranian influence in Iraq.

The weight of the Qods Force's hand in Iraqi governance was made evident to Washington almost from the start. When Ryan Crocker drew up a list of names for an Iraqi Governing Council in 2003, Soleimani passed word through Iraqi intermediaries that he claimed the right of first refusal. Crocker would later tell the reporter Dexter Filkins that "the formation of the governing council was in its essence a negotiation between Tehran and Washington." Some Governing Council members, Crocker ruefully added, would after talking to American officials in Baghdad fly to Tehran for urgent "consultations" with Soleimani.[19]

The first Iraqi elections took place on 30 January 2005. At stake were 275 seats in a new parliament, the sole purpose of which was to draft a new constitution. The Iranian-backed United Iraqi Alliance won a majority with 140 seats, although the final results were skewed by the fact that Iraq's Arab Sunnis stayed away from the voting booth. The question now emerged of the Sadrists' attitude toward the new government. To help answer it,

Moqtada al-Sadr sent his key lieutenant, Qais al-Khazali, to Tehran for meetings with Soleimani and Abdul Reza Shahlai. Both Iranians pressed Khazali to recognize the new Iraqi government. In the end, al-Sadr gave a rather tepid endorsement of the United Iraqi Alliance.[20]

The new Iraqi constitution was drafted and ratified by 15 October 2005. This paved the way for the 15 December 2005 general election, which would form a new parliament. The turnout was higher this time, thanks to Arab Sunni participation, but the result was a sprawling mess, with no single, clear-cut winner. By spring 2006 the parliament was effectively deadlocked by rival coalitions, none of which had sufficient seats to form a government. On this occasion, the Qods Force played a direct role in backroom negotiations in Baghdad. In April 2006, Qassem Soleimani himself entered the Green Zone—under Iraqi government protection and with U.S. knowledge—to move the internal coalition-building process forward. He not only removed the interim prime minister but helped ensure Nuri al-Maliki's selection as the consensus candidate.[21]

What is noteworthy about Iranian involvement in Iraq was less Tehran's predilection for playing multiple sides against each other than the dominance of one agency—the Qods Force—in making and implementing policy. Unlike most governments, which maintain separate bureaucracies for conventional diplomacy and covert action, Iran had just one when it came to Iraq. Qods Force officers handled the most sensitive diplomacy affecting the future of that country while their colleagues shipped weapons to Iraqi insurgents. No wonder American ambassadors insisted that Iraq's dealings with Iran be handled by professional diplomats only.

What this meant was that while Qassem Soleimani and his lieutenants were mediating Iraq's conflicts, they were also regulating the deliveries of EFPs to groups like AAH. Even as the number of EFP incidents decreased in late 2007, coalition forces observed increased sophistication in the Shia insurgency as a whole. Over time, intelligence analysts developed an understanding of Qods Force activities in Iraq detailed enough to judge with confidence that improved Shia militia combat abilities were a direct result of Qods Force and Hezbollah training programs.[22]

TRAINING CAMPS

Even in 2003 the Qods Force had an elaborate network of training camps in Iran to meet the needs of the Badr Corps and other, smaller Iraqi Shia groups. From 2004 to 2006, as Tehran stepped up its clandestine war against the Americans and British, it developed new tactics, techniques, and procedures for training proxies. One Qods Force case officer was assigned to each Iraqi militant organization, and it was this person who arranged the Iraqis into groups of ten to twenty per camp. Most trainees were shipped across the border to Mehran or Shalamcheh, where they embarked on either buses or planes for training camps near Tehran, Ahvaz, Kermanshah, and Mashhad (see map 4). Sometimes, specific camps were set aside for certain nationalities or specific training needs.[23]

The types of training varied according to developments inside Iraq. Since the Qods Force usually tried to distance itself from direct attribution, it often employed the "train the trainer" approach, using Hezbollah as the cutout. Under this system, a small group of Iraqi trainees would be brought to Iran (or, in certain cases, Lebanon), taught how to handle particular weapons or execute insurgent tactics, and then sent back to Iraq to teach others what they had learned. Nearly all courses focused on the fundamentals: physical fitness, weapons familiarity, and basic infantry tactics, like maintaining perimeter security, organizing fields of fire, laying ambushes, exploiting terrain, using camouflage, and conducting land navigation. More advanced courses were set aside for intelligence, counterintelligence, "indirect fires" (i.e., mortars and rockets requiring third-party spotting), man-portable air-defense systems, advanced antitank guided missiles, sniping, and EFPs.[24]

MAP 4. Qods Force Training Camps for Iraq Operations

HEZBOLLAH IN IRAQ

The training system for Iraqi proxies had been in place since the early years of the Islamic Revolution, but Qassem Soleimani's decision to implement the second, kinetic phase of his plan required a greatly expanded training infrastructure. As good as the Qods Force was at training proxies and foreign militants, the rapidly escalating requirements of Iraq's civil war posed a formidable challenge in logistics and resources. It is in this light that we can better understand why the Qods Force turned to Hezbollah for help. Hezbollah's Unit 2800, staffed by veterans of years of fighting the Israelis, managed the training of Iraqi Shia militias at camps in Iran and Lebanon. It also helped that they spoke Arabic and were familiar with Arab culture.[25]

The case of Ali Musa Daqduq offers a useful window into the Qods Force / Hezbollah relationship in Iraq. Before he was captured by JSOC in 2007, Daqduq, whom we met in the two previous chapters, was the deputy commander of Unit 2800; Qassem Soleimani and Abdul Reza Shahlai assigned him the task of improving the Shia insurgency as a fighting force. Consequently, Daqduq made four trips to southern Iraq in order to assess the weapons and training requirements of groups like AAH. In addition, Daqduq brought Hezbollah promotional videos to show the Iraqis how their Lebanese cousins ambushed Israeli patrols and used artillery rockets as terror weapons.[26] Daqduq's after-action reports gave the Qods Force useful data on the strengths of the Iraqis as well as areas for improvement. Among his proposals was the creation of cells in each special group that would receive special training on the use of EFPs, mortars, and abductions. At the time of his capture, Daqduq was advising AAH leader Qais al-Khazali on insurgent warfare and leadership.[27]

"IRANIANIZATION"

By 2008, it would be fair to say, Qassem Soleimani was one of the most powerful warlords in Iraq. In the Shia south he held many of the key cards, including influence over provincial and municipal politics. In Baghdad he had the ear of Iraqi politicians, senior military officers, and the key Iraqi intelligence agencies. Confronted by this "creeping Iranianization" of the Iraqi government, American diplomats were left hoping that too much Iranian interference would trigger a nationalist backlash in Iraq. In an April 2009 cable, the American embassy tried to put a positive spin on the Iranian challenge: "Ultimately, Iraqi nationalism and self-reliance are the most effective long-term defenses against Iranian domination, and the degree and nature of Iranian influence in Iraq will be determined less by the level of U.S. military forces in Iraq than by the Iraqi political and economic capacity to balance Iranian influence and channel it into mutually beneficial areas."[28]

In private talks with Iraqi officials, American diplomats and military officers reiterated a common set of themes. First, the Iranian government was not treating Iraq like a "normal sovereign nation." In fact, second, the Qods Force was treating Iraq as if it were Lebanon or the Palestinians.

Unfortunately, this appeal to Iraqi nationalism missed the point: many of Iraq's elected leaders were beholden to Qassem Soleimani and had to listen to him when he called whether they liked it or not.[29] Still, in public statements American officials were much less ambiguous about Iran than they had been even a year before. On 8 April 2008, for example, General Petraeus told the Senate Armed Services Committee, "Unchecked, the special groups pose the greatest long-term threat to the viability of a democratic Iraq. Iran has fueled the violence in a particularly damaging way. The hand of Iran was very clear in recent weeks."[30] For his part, CIA director Michael Hayden emphasized the role of senior Iranian officials in fomenting Iraqi instability: "It is my opinion, [that] it is the policy of the Iranian government, *approved at the highest level of that government*, to facilitate the killing of Americans in Iraq."[31]

In addition to clearing the air in public about Iran's hostile activities in Iraq, the U.S. government now began inserting unmistakable warnings into its public statements. In response to a query about Iran, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Mike Mullen, stated, "I have reserve capability. It would be a mistake to think that we are out of combat capability."[32] Warnings such as these were sufficient to prompt a Qods Force response in back channels, to this effect: *We condemn the recent outbreak of violence in Basra. We do not control the Shia militias that have been fighting there nor are we directing them.*[33] Later it was revealed that the United States contemplated attacking Iranian training camps, seizing Qods Force safe houses in Iraq, or conducting air strikes on EFP production facilities in Iran.[34] In the end, though, Washington settled for putting Tehran on notice that its activities in Iraq were being monitored and the United States might respond with force.

In hindsight it seems clear that the Qods Force strategy of diplomacy, calibrated violence, and influence making was hard for Washington and its allies to match. Its challenge could not be solved by military force alone, because at the end of the day Qassem Soleimani exerted more influence over the Iraqi leadership than did either General Petraeus or Ambassador Crocker. Furthermore, to American officials the Qods Force seemed to be conducting two contradictory policies in Iraq: on the one hand, it was arming multiple Iraqi factions, some of which were combating an Iraqi government that Iran publicly supported. On the other, Iran's Qods Force

was more than willing to step in and mediate conflicts that it had itself helped create. Tehran sought a stable Iraq only to the extent that it served long-term Iranian objectives. In the meantime, the Qods Force generated in Iraq instability of severity carefully calibrated to weaken further that country's institutions, drive the Americans out, and increase Iranian leverage for the endgame.

PART IV

The Persian Gulf, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen

17

The Saudi Ambassador Plot

At first the whole thing seemed too ridiculous and implausible: hire Mexican drug cartel hitmen to assassinate a Saudi ambassador to the United States at a trendy Georgetown restaurant? Up until 2011, when this bizarre plot was exposed, the conventional wisdom on the Qods Force was that it was a disciplined, highly trained, elite unit of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. It was professional, it excelled at covering its tracks, and its operatives generally practiced superb clandestine tradecraft. Not only that, but the Qods Force expected the same level of professionalism from its proxies. Yet the plot to murder the Saudi ambassador was unbelievably amateurish. At its heart was a fifty-six-year-old Iranian-American citizen who couldn't hold a steady job and was described by one associate as "almost comically absent-minded."[1] Moreover, this individual had received no training in clandestine operations. His handlers, two identified Qods Force officers, never left Iranian soil but tried to manage this highly risky mission from thousands of miles away. The supposed link to the Mexican drug cartel, Las Zetas, was a man named "Junior," who, sure enough, was a confidential informant of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA).

DISBELIEF AND SCORN

When the U.S. Justice Department announced the charges in October 2011, few in mainstream media or the Washington, DC, think-tank community believed that the vaunted Qods Force could be so reckless and incompetent.[2] First of all, it was hard to pinpoint why the Qods Force would

carry out this particular attack. It certainly was brazen, since the last publicly recorded case of an Iranian regime–directed assassination on American soil dated back to 1980, when an American convert to Shia Islam had murdered Ali Akbar Tabatabai at his Bethesda, Maryland, home.[3] The new, alleged mission was outrageously risky given the high likelihood of American casualties, in addition to the ambassador, if the attack succeeded. The possibility of exposure was high, and that could be grounds for war between Iran and the United States. Unlike previous Qods Force operations, which relied on highly competent proxies like Hezbollah's Islamic Jihad Organization, this one depended on a dubious middleman in a Mexican drug cartel (see figure 7).

It was assumed in the United States that the Saudi ambassador plot was, however amateurish, a response to a concerted American and Israeli diplomatic campaign to sanction Iran over its nuclear program. Around the time the plot was conceived Iranian computers associated with nuclear research had been afflicted by a mysterious virus that would eventually be traced back to the U.S. National Security Agency and Israel's Unit 8200.[4] Finally, and perhaps most significantly, there had also been a rash of assassinations against Iranian nuclear scientists in Tehran. The Qods Force apparently wanted to send a strong signal to the United States and its allies that Iran would retaliate for attacks on its nuclear project. Yet, as the Iranians knew better than most, deterring pressure by threatening violence rests on a proven ability to carry out that threat. That, in turn, depends on the competence of the proxy entrusted with it.

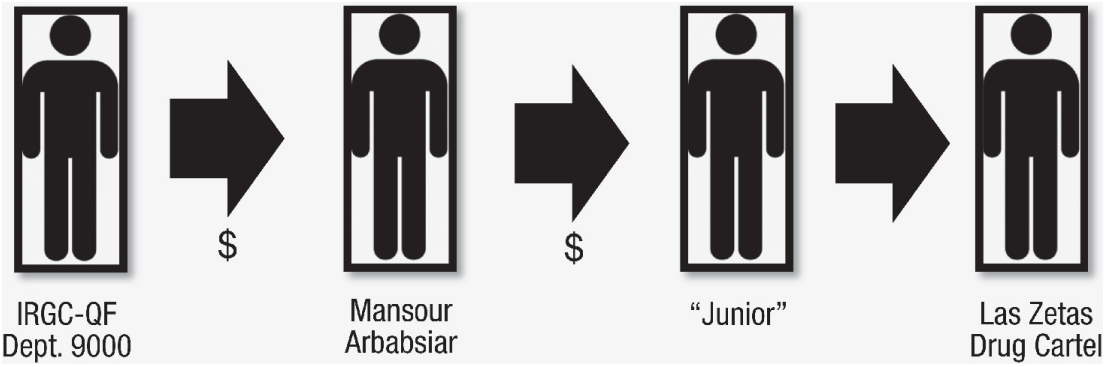


FIGURE 7. Slipping Tradecraft?

The selected target, Adel al-Jubeir, was not a member of the Saudi royal family like his predecessors but a veteran foreign service officer who reportedly took a hard line on Iran.[5] But that still didn't answer the questions: Why him? Why Saudi Arabia? Israel would have been a more plausible target, given the widespread suspicion that it was behind the computer virus attacks and the assassination of nuclear scientists. On the other hand, Israeli government targets were especially well guarded, while Saudi ones, presumably, were not.

According to U.S. court documents, the Iranian ringleader of the ambassador plot was Abdul Reza Shahlai. We've already come across his name in the context of the Qods Force's covert war against the United States in Iraq. As the leader of Department 9000, Brigadier Shahlai was responsible for special external operations, which included sensitive missions against American targets.

"JACK"

The Iranian American at the very center of the operation was Mansour Arbabsiar, who just happened to be Shahlai's cousin. Arbabsiar had grown up in Kermanshah before the revolution, then moved to Texas, where he became a naturalized American citizen and attended Texas A&M.[6] Like many Iranian immigrants to America, Arbabsiar selected an "American" name, Jack.[7] Unlike his cousin, Arbabsiar was not particularly religious. In fact, he reportedly smoked hashish, drank alcohol, and solicited prostitutes. He wasn't terribly successful in business, either. One of his colleagues later described him as "perennially disheveled" and "hopelessly disorganized." All in all, Mansour Arbabsiar was the least likely candidate imaginable to organize Iran's first attack on U.S. soil in more than thirty years.[8]

Sometime in early spring 2011 Arbabsiar visited relatives in Iran, and it was during this trip that he reestablished contact with his cousin Abdul. Maybe Shahlai, brigadier in Iran's Revolutionary Guards that he was, made Arbabsiar feel insecure, but for whatever reason the American began bragging about "connections" to a Mexican drug cartel. As a covert operative in an elite unit, Shahlai should have been wary of his cousin's tall tales. Instead, he reportedly asked Arbabsiar if his cartel friends would be willing to kidnap the Saudi ambassador to the United States.[9]

Hindsight is of course 20/20, and if the plot's absurdities are easy for us to appreciate now, at the time they were not so obvious to Brigadier Shahlai. After all, Arbabsiar was family: it was unlikely he would betray his cousin or Iran. More importantly, Arbabsiar had an American passport, which meant he could travel easily to the United States and other countries without the hassles an Iranian passport holder would encounter. The Los Zetas drug cartel evidently was seen as a good cover for the operation, offering sufficient plausible deniability to cover the Qods Force's tracks but still leaving that necessary (but unprovable) aura of an ultimate Iranian hand.[10] We should recall that the U.S. government knew about the plot only because Arbabsiar's Las Zetas contact happened to be a DEA source.[11] Indeed, there is a certain degree of coincidence here that understandably raised questions about what Washington really knew and how, and whether Arbabsiar was the victim of a sting operation.

THE PLOT UNFOLDS

In any case, Shahlai tasked with the operational details his deputy. Later, the Bahrain government would allege that Colonel Shakuri had been directly involved at the same time in the 2011 unrest in that country. Ultimately, Shakuri would be indicted (in absentia) with Arbabsiar for his involvement in the plot.[12]

On 24 May 2011, Arbabsiar had his first meeting with Junior, in Reynosa, Mexico. Arbabsiar told Junior he wanted to destroy a Saudi embassy and, when asked if he had any experience with explosives, replied that he knew how to use C4. After the meeting Junior informed his DEA handlers of Arbabsiar's inquiry.[13] One can only imagine how American federal agents received this news.

On 30 May 2011, Arbabsiar traveled to Iran, where he informed Colonel Shakuri of his first meeting with Junior. Shakuri allegedly told Arbabsiar he would meet with his own boss, Qassem Soleimani, and request further instructions (what those instructions proved to be has never been disclosed). Shortly after, $100,000 was wired to Arbabsiar's account. Meanwhile, Mansour Arbabsiar returned to the United States and crossed into Mexico for further meetings with Junior to discussed possibilities for attacks against

Saudi or Israeli targets. At some point in this second meeting Arbabsiar raised the idea of assassinating the Saudi ambassador to the United States.[14]

Yet another meeting took place on 14 July 2011, but this time Junior had a secret audio recorder provided by the DEA. Prompted by Junior to tell him about his cousin, Arbabsiar bragged that he was not only a "big general in [the] army" but was also "wanted in America" and worked "in other countries" for the Iranian government.[15] It was this cousin, Arbabsiar added, who wanted to kill the Saudi ambassador. Junior said it would take four men, whom he would recruit, to perform the hit, plus $1.5 million. Arbabsiar replied that "the money is in Iran" but that he could get his hands on $100,000 fairly quickly.[16]

The fourth meeting took place only two days later. Junior produced a picture of Ambassador al-Jubeir and asked Arbabsiar to confirm his identity. Junior then informed Arbabsiar that his people had shadowed the Saudi and had reported that he often had seven or eight bodyguards when he left the embassy. The ambassador did, however, have one predictable pattern: once or twice a week he went to Café Milano in the Georgetown neighborhood of Washington.[17] "There could be collateral casualties," Junior cautioned, if Arbabsiar elected to have his team kill the ambassador in the restaurant. "No problem," Arbabsiar replied, "they want the guy killed. Whether a hundred die with him is not relevant."[18] A few weeks later, Arbabsiar transferred $100,000 into Junior's bank account, which was actually controlled by the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).[19]

"JUST DO IT QUICKLY"

On 28 September 2011, Mansour Arbabsiar flew to Mexico City to finalize the details of the operation with Junior; however, he was denied entry by Mexican immigration and sent back to New York's John F. Kennedy Airport on the next flight. There he was promptly arrested by the FBI.[20] Arbabsiar waived his Miranda rights and revealed to his captors important details of the plot, including the role of the Qods Force.[21] When the FBI showed him seven pictures of which two were known Qods Force officers, Arbabsiar correctly identified one of them. A few days later Arbabsiar called Shakuri in Tehran while the FBI listened in. Using the agreed code name for the operation—Chevrolet—Arbabsiar informed Shakuri that the

mission was “ready, it’s ready, uh, to be done. I should continue, right?”[22] Shakuri replied with apparent impatience, “Yes, yes, yes … just do it quickly. It’s late.”[23]

On 11 October, the U.S. Justice Department announced that charges had been filed in New York Southern District Court against Mansour Arbabsiar and Abdul Reza Shakuri for “alleged participation in a plot directed by elements of the Iranian government to murder the Saudi ambassador to the United States with explosives while the ambassador was in the United States.” The charges included conspiracy to murder a foreign official and conspiracy to commit an act of international terrorism.[24] The attorney general, Eric Holder, added that the operation had been “directed and approved by *elements of the Iranian government* and, specifically, senior members of the Quds force.”[25] By referring to “elements” of the Iranian government as responsible for the plot, the U.S. government was carefully leaving open the possibility that the most senior officials in Tehran had not been aware of what the Qods Force was planning. In a public statement, President Obama reinforced this impression: “We believe that even if at the highest levels there was not detailed operational knowledge, there has to be accountability.”[26]

Tehran’s responses were predictable and pro forma. The American charges were “absurd”and part of a “new propaganda campaign” mounted by Washington against Iran. Supreme Leader Khamenei stated that “repeating stupid and useless methods by hopeless Western policy makers to create Iranophobia will not be fruitful and they will fail again.”[27] The Iranian foreign minister offered a different argument: “There are 150 Gholam Shakuris [in Iran]. Interpol [the International Criminal Police Organization] sent us a question about this name, and our investigation showed a certain Gholam Shakuri who lived in the United States and is a member of the Mojahedin-e Khalq organization.”[28]

“ABUNDANCE OF STUPIDITY”

Iranian denials and obfuscation aside, it was not a high point in Qassem Soleimani’s career or for the reputation of his Qods Force. Some sources suggest that Soleimani ordered a temporary halt to ongoing Qods Force operations pending a review of the agency’s security procedures. He could

not exclude the possibility of a mole or moles inside the Qods Force, and for a clandestine service that could be disastrous.[29]

In the Western media, the news of the Saudi ambassador plot was greeted with widespread disbelief and even dismay on the part of those who expected more professionalism from the Qods Force. One commentator said the affair had the "ring of a far-fetched Hollywood thriller," others that it was not consistent with what they thought they knew about the Qods Force.[30] David Ignatius of the *Washington Post* put it best: "The puzzle is why the Iranians would undertake such a risky operation, and with such embarrassingly poor tradecraft? Soleimani and his group are some of the savviest clandestine operators in the world."[31]

In the United Kingdom, the *Telegraph* offered another perspective. The ambassador plot should not be seen in isolation, it cautioned, since there had been a recent string of Qods Force and Hezbollah operational failures: "At least nine apparent Iranian assassination and bomb plots around the world have failed or been thwarted."[32] All of this did suggest that the Qods Force was either having a serious breakdown in its tactics, techniques, or procedures or had been infiltrated by foreign intelligence.

A few analysts suggested that perhaps the Iranian Intelligence Ministry was more proficient at this kind of work.[33] Maybe the intelligence minister, Heydar Moslehi, thought so too and was being deliberately ironic when he told the Iranian media that "the initial reaction to this claim [i.e., the plot] by our intelligence officers was genuine surprise at the abundance of stupidity evident in this scenario."[34] After all, it was no secret that the Qods Force and the Intelligence Ministry had been rivals for years.

On 17 October 2012, Mansour Arbabsiar pled guilty to murder for hire and two conspiracy counts. His attorney asked for a ten-year sentence, but the judge gave him twenty-five years instead, noting that the defendant "worked for over six months to assassinate a foreign diplomat on foreign soil. In a case like this, deterrence is of supreme import."[35] The U.S. government carried out administrative responses to this incident as well. The Department of the Treasury imposed financial sanctions on four named Qods Force officers, including three who were directly linked to the assassination plot: Qassem Soleimani, Abdul Reza Shahlai, and Ali Gholam Shakuri.[36]

ASSESSMENT

We should take a step back and place the conspiracy in the broader context of Iranian foreign policy at the time. This operation, however misconceived it might seem, was part of a larger Qods Force campaign to relieve international pressure on Iran over its nuclear program. The goal was to demonstrate to those powers deemed most hostile to Iran—the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia—that diplomatic pressure or sanctions would trigger Iranian retaliation in an unexpected quarter. First, it was widely suspected that Iran's computer problems mentioned earlier, which temporarily derailed part of its nuclear program, had been caused by the Stuxnet virus planted by the Americans and Israelis. Second, the Israelis were widely believed to have been behind a campaign to assassinate Iranian nuclear scientists, since this matched Israel's track record and was consistent with its current threats.[37] Each of these actions merited a response in some domain. Such was probably the thinking at Qods Force headquarters in Tehran. The sheer brazenness of the assassination plot disguises an apparent Iranian miscalculation: by murdering a Saudi official and not an American one, Tehran may have hoped to limit the scope of American retaliation if the U.S. government traced the plot to Iran. As the *Telegraph* had noted, this failed plot was but one of several planned operations that would include Israeli and possibly American targets. What is not in dispute is that the plot to kill the Saudi ambassador in Washington, DC, was not one of the Qods Force's better performances.

Since Saudi Arabia was ultimately the intended target of this operation, we will now turn to the Iran-Saudi conflict and its impact on the Arab world's poorest and most isolated state—Yemen.

18

The Yemen Trap

The video image is somewhat hazy, but it obviously shows a sunny day with ocean waves lapping in the foreground. A warship is silhouetted on the near horizon, its starboard side toward the camera. For a brief moment, a red target circle flickers in the video footage, highlighting the stern of the apparently immobile ship. Suddenly, the perspective changes, and we see the intended target from a different angle, just seconds before an explosion fills the camera lens. A voice near the camera is heard excitedly reciting an Arabic mantra: "*God is Great! Death to America! Death to Israel! Curse the Jews! Victory to Islam!*"[1]

No, this is not an Iranian attack on a U.S. warship in the Strait of Hormuz. The ship is a Saudi frigate, the *Al-Madina*, which was patrolling near the Yemeni port of al-Hodeida on 30 January 2017 when she was hit by a remote-controlled, explosive small boat. Later, the Royal Saudi Navy released footage taken from a video camera mounted in the *Al-Madina*'s helicopter hangar. The eye has less than a second to register the incoming speedboat, which hits the ship's stern at an oblique angle before exploding.[2] An Iranian-backed Yemeni militia called Ansar Allah—God's Helpers, also known as the Houthis—claimed responsibility for the attack.[3]

STRAITS TALK

The strategic importance of the Strait of Hormuz is widely understood. A narrow channel of water, it links the Indian Ocean to a quasi–inland sea, the Persian Gulf. An estimated 10 to 20 percent of the world's oil flows through this strait on any given day, making it a natural flashpoint for international

conflict. Indeed, Iran has threatened to shut down the Strait of Hormuz on a number of occasions, although it has never actually done so.[4]

Less attention has been devoted to the Strait of Bab al-Mandeb, but it too is a strategic bottleneck, connecting the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean. An estimated sixty ships transit this strait every day, bringing oil and natural gas from the Persian Gulf or automobiles from South Korea and Japan to European and North American markets.[5] The simple fact is that the vaunted Suez Canal (which links the Red and Mediterranean Seas) is useless if the Bab al-Mandeb is blocked (see map 5).

MAP 5. Middle East Maritime Passages

If Tehran shuttered the Strait of Hormuz (something that is within its power) it would likely invite international condemnation. Not only would

everyone pay more at the gas pump, but an American blockade of Iran's ports would almost certainly follow, thereby jeopardizing Tehran's own ability to export oil and gas. But the Bab al-Mandeb is different from Iran's perspective, and in ways that make the temptation to cut it difficult for Iranian strategists to resist. If an Iranian ally like the Houthis were to block this critical maritime artery, the effects would be similar to those of a Hormuz closure—higher energy prices—but Iran could escape the opprobrium and military retaliation that would almost certainly follow.

The Bab al-Mandeb attracts Iranian attention for other reasons as well. It has become a laboratory of sorts for Revolutionary Guards naval officers, in which to test certain weapons in realistic conditions. Over the last five years the Houthis have employed a number of sophisticated systems, including explosive boats (like the one that struck the *Al-Madina*), sea mines, antiship cruise missiles, killer drone aircraft, and ballistic missiles. Much of this equipment entered Houthi hands courtesy of the Qods Force.[6] From Tehran's perspective, the Houthis constitute a classic economy-of-force operation: with a minimal investment, Iran ties down a substantial number of Saudi forces in a country famous for its ability to defeat foreign occupiers.

IRANIAN AND SAUDI POLICIES

Iranian interest in Yemeni politics took some years to gestate. The realities of geography—the Arabian Peninsula and Persian Gulf physically separate Yemen from Iran—meant that the affairs of the remote Yemeni state rarely attracted much interest in Tehran. To put it another way, Tehran has always had other, more important fish to fry, such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Turkey, Syria, and Lebanon. The last shah of Iran had little interest in Yemen either, although he did contribute a brigade of his Imperial Iranian Army to Oman in the 1970s to defeat a South Yemen–backed insurgency. In this case, though, the shah sought to preserve a friendly regional monarchy rather than project military power in the Arabian Peninsula.[7] Interestingly, revolutionary Iran was no different. While it tried to incite Shia uprisings in several neighboring states, like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain, Iran seemed to regard Yemen as a backwater with little potential for revolution.

Unlike the Iranians, however, the Saudis have an abiding interest in Yemen. For one thing, the Saudi-Yemeni border is more than eight hundred miles long and is historically disputed, over the status of two provinces that now lie in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, Yemen's sectarian divide has intrigued but at the same time troubled the Saudis. From Riyadh's perspective, the Zaidi Shia of Yemen's northwest are all but apostates, but not so the nearly two-thirds of the Yemeni population that is Sunni and follows the more moderate Shafei school of Islamic law.[8] Nevertheless, the Saudis used their 1970s petrodollars just as they had done in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Palestine, Egypt, and elsewhere—to export their austere version of Islam to Yemen. One result of this campaign was a heightened awareness among Yemenis of what marked a Zaidi as different from a Sunni. Sectarian tension inevitably ensued.[9]

ENTER THE HOUTHIS

The reaction of some members of the Zaidi minority to the growth of Saudi Islam in Yemen was a back-to-the-basics social and religious drive. The Ansar Allah movement was born in the country's northwestern province, Saada, founded by a charismatic preacher named Hussein Badreddine al-Houthi. As Houthi's influence spread across the traditional Zaidi heartland, he became emboldened, lashing out at the corruption and nepotism of the country's long-serving president, Ali Abdullah Saleh.[10] Saleh's divide-and-conquer approach to ruling Yemen, which Saleh likened to "dancing on the heads of snakes," did not create the kind of institutional mechanisms critical for Yemen's long-term survival. Still, Saleh commanded the armed forces, and he tried using them to crush recurrent Houthi rebellions. In the end, all Ali Abdullah Saleh did was turn Hossein al-Houthi into a martyr in 2004 and forge his followers, the "Houthis," into a political and military movement.[11]

From 2004, when the Houthi revolt began, until 2012, when he was ousted from power, Saleh alleged that the Houthis had been created and were backed by Iran, but public evidence was lacking.[12] Even so, Yemeni security officers later told Reuters that Iran first approached the Houthis in 2004 and shortly afterward began smuggling small amounts of weapons to Houthi-held areas by sea.[13] There was a Hezbollah angle as well. In 2015,

an unnamed Lebanese Hezbollah commander bragged that Houthi-Hezbollah relations went back at least a decade, adding, “They trained with us in Iran, then we trained them here and in Yemen. Yemenis are fierce and intelligent fighters, you can’t imagine what they have been through.”[14]

As Iran’s loyal handmaiden in other wars (Iraq and Syria), Hezbollah now maintains a discreet but influential presence in Houthi-held areas of Yemen. Some reports indicate that Hezbollah provides the Houthis with weapons and expertise in political organization, media, and intelligence operations.[15] As we have seen in other parts of this book, a Hezbollah presence in a given country usually means that Iranians are not far behind.

In any case, the real change to Yemen’s fragile internal equilibrium came in 2012, when the Arab Spring swept Saleh from power. The Houthis exploited the central government’s weakness by seizing the capital, Sanaa, in September 2014 and chasing Saleh’s successor, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, from power. At this point the insurgents had captured much of the Zaidi heartland, but not content to stop there they marched south to Aden, on the Indian Ocean. This move triggered armed intervention by a Saudi-led regional coalition under the rubric of Operation Decisive Storm.

IRANIAN SUPPORT FOR HOUTHIS: ROUND ONE

Until 2012, Qods Force support for the Houthis was limited to rifles, grenades, and money. Smugglers carried the weapons from Iranian ports to various points off the Yemeni coast, where they were transferred to dhows and skiffs for final delivery. U.S. forces in the region routinely monitored communications between Qods Force officers and local smugglers, and at times the United States passed actionable information to the Yemenis or regional navies.[16]

There are two examples of cargoes originating in Iran being intercepted by Yemeni and U.S. forces during the 2012–13 time frame. In 2012, the Yemeni authorities, acting on a tip from the United States, seized a cargo of EFP components in Aden Harbor that had been delivered by either an Egyptian or Turkish freighter.[17] On 29 January 2013, Yemeni coast guard officers on the USS *Farragut* (DDG 99) boarded a forty-meter-long dhow, the *Jihan-1*, and found a small arsenal: 18 Katyusha 122-mm rockets, 10

Iranian-origin Misagh-1 MANPADS, 16,723 blocks of C4 explosive, 100 rocket-propelled grenades, and Iranian-manufactured nightvision goggles.[18]

In a revealing footnote to the *Jihan-1* affair, when the Houthis occupied Sanaa in September 2014 they demanded the release of the *Jihan-1* crew. Detained by the previous Yemeni government, the captives reportedly included two men from Lebanese Hezbollah and three Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) officers.[19]

The Qods Force could not resist interfering in Yemen once the Saudi military got involved in March 2015. After all, the country had been a quagmire for both the British and the Egyptians in the 1960s.[20] From the Iranian perspective, Yemen was a perfect trap for the Saudis and their Arab allies; insurgency suited the Yemeni temperament, and a lavishly equipped conventional military could be bled out there. Moreover, there would be little risk for Iran in Yemen but much to be gained if the Qods Force played its cards right. One important Iranian consideration was increasing arms deliveries to the Houthis and training them in their use.

ABDUL REZA SHAHLAI

Like the Gaza Strip, Yemen presented logistical difficulties for the Qods Force staff in Tehran. One obstacle was geography: between Iran and distant Yemen lay a hostile Saudi Arabia and an Oman that was desperate to stay neutral. Then there was the international maritime antipiracy force that patrolled the waters off Yemen's Red Sea and Gulf of Aden coasts.

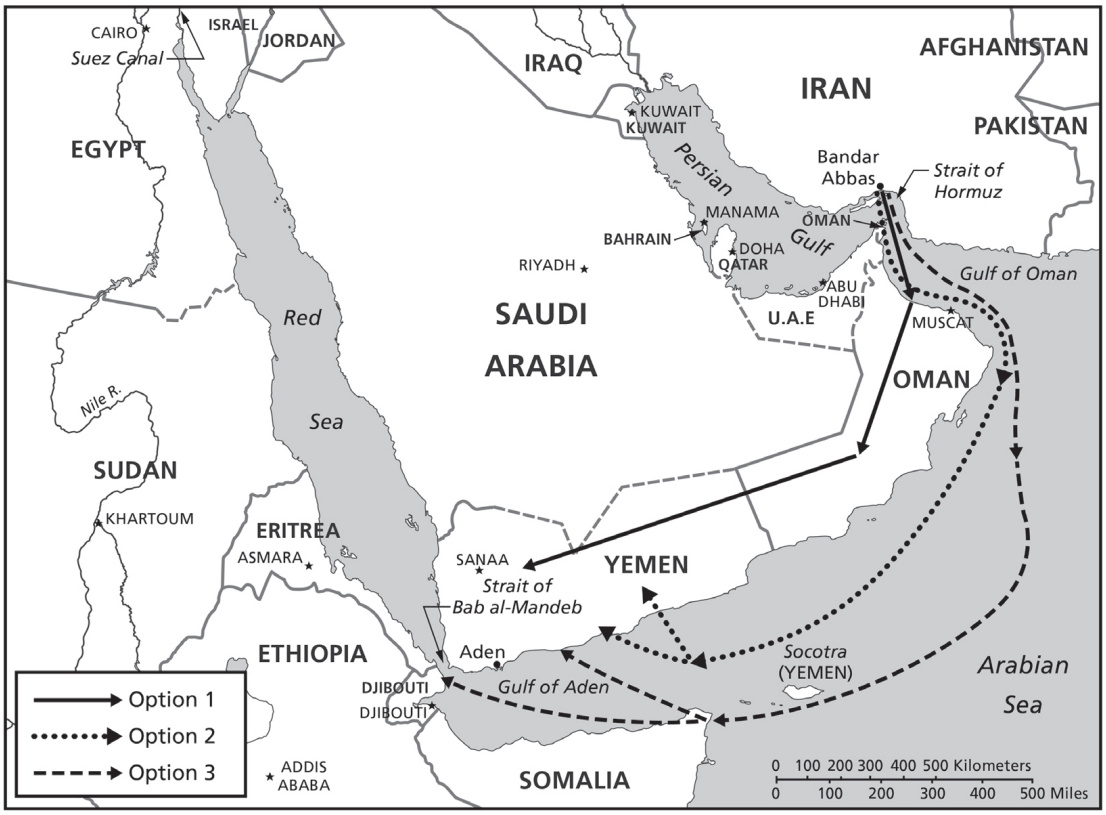
To solve these and other anticipated problems, Qassem Soleimani sent the seasoned Abdul Reza Shahlai to Sanaa as his liaison with the Houthis. Like many Qods Force officers, Shahlai is little known to the public except for (as we have seen in previous chapters) his roles in Iraq from 2004 to 2011 and in the 2011 plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the United States. One report plausibly suggests that Shahlai was about the same age as Soleimani and, like him, a veteran of the Iran-Iraq war, where he served in the IRGC's Ramazan Base for unconventional warfare.[21]

We don't know how Shahlai reached Houthi-held areas in Yemen. Since the Saudis and their partners effectively owned Yemen's airspace, Shahlai could not fly to Sanaa on commercial aircraft. Instead, he probably used one of the smuggler routes—overland via Oman, or by sea—that he would

also assess for future arms shipments.[22] Indeed, we can only surmise what Shahlai reported back. He probably concluded that the Houthis needed a great deal of Iranian help to inflict a significant defeat on the well-funded, if inexperienced, Saudi-led force. In addition to AK-47 assault rifles, PKM machine guns, and Dragunov sniper rifles, Iran's Yemeni allies needed air defenses, better antitank systems to deal with Saudi M1A2s, and above all, money. Beyond that, the Houthis required assistance in administration, political organization, and the running of a more effective domestic security service.[23]

When Shahlai and his team tackled the logistics problem, they undoubtedly recognized that, distance and coalition naval forces notwithstanding, Yemen's long coastline gave them a priceless advantage. Unlike Israel, which extensively monitored the shores of the Gaza Strip, Yemen had nowhere near the resources needed to watch its two-thousand-kilometer coastline. As one Yemeni security official put it, "You cannot observe this length of coast even if you bring in all the navies of the world."[24]

As later interceptions of arms shipments from Iran would demonstrate, the Qods Force identified three different routes by which to get weapons into Houthi hands. The first, in which the *Jihan-1* participated before it was boarded in 2013, involved ferrying them by smuggler ship to points off the Yemeni coast. There they would be offloaded to smaller vessels for the short trip to a Houthi-controlled port or beach in one of the large swaths of Yemeni shoreline that were unmonitored by any government.[25] The second route entailed shipping cargo to a Somali port, such as Berbera, where it could be broken down into smaller shipments and shuttled across the Gulf of Aden at night to Houthi-controlled ports. The advantage of the Somali option was that the weapons sent that way were likeliest to reach the Houthi forces that needed them most, namely those besieged in al-Hodeida or Taizz.[26] The third option ran through remote parts of Oman and eastern Yemen by land routes known only to smugglers. As long as the right fees were paid to the various tribes and local militias, it was a reasonable bet that sensitive cargoes would reach Houthi-controlled territory without being intercepted by coalition aircraft (see map 6).[27]



MAP 6. Qods Force Logistics Routes to Houthis

Some Iranian weapons systems, like the Shahab-1 and Zelzal-series ballistic missiles, were shipped to the Houthis in pieces, since assembled they would be hard to disguise as “routine contraband.” Presumably Qods Force or Hezbollah experts would help the Houthis reassemble them for use against the Saudis.[28]

Even so, it was one thing to send advanced weapons like ballistic missiles to the Houthis but another to train them how to use those arms effectively. Iraqis, Syrians, Lebanese, or Afghans could be easily brought to Iran for training, but not Houthis. Some Yemenis were in fact ultimately trained in either Iran or Lebanon, but extracting large groups of them from a country under an air, land, and sea blockade took creative smuggling. Small Qods Force and Hezbollah training teams were sent to Houthi-held Yemen as well. For example, some reports listed the names of Hezbollah supervisors (Khalil Harb and Abu Ali Tabatabai) on assignment to the Houthis.[29]

We don’t know if Abdul Reza Shahlai was on permanent assignment to Sanaa or if another Qods Force officer deputized for him there when he was back in Tehran. Unlike Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria, where Qassem Soleimani and a few of his lieutenants became public figures, Yemen has been a public-relations black hole for the Qods Force. It is unlikely that Soleimani ever set foot in the country, given the risks involved in getting him in and out.

IRANIAN SUPPORT FOR THE HOUTHIS: ROUND TWO

After several years of stepped-up Iranian and Hezbollah technical assistance, the Houthis demonstrated a marked improvement in their military capabilities, intelligence and security functions, and overall organization. The Houthis insisted that all of this was owing to “indigenous capacity,” but there were distinct Qods Force and Hezbollah fingerprints everywhere. Among the weapons and other equipment seized by the Saudis, Emiratis, and the international maritime coalition off Yemen’s coast were Iranian manufacturing tags and Farsi-language training manuals. Many weapons bore close similarities to systems already in service in Iran.[30]

All the weapons discussed below fit into Iran’s operational concept for closing the Strait of Hormuz. Some are aimed at naval vessels, while others are intended to damage or destroy oil infrastructure. Hezbollah in Lebanon has already used a few, such as the C-802 antiship cruise missile, in war. Most have technical requirements for manufacture and employment that probably exceed any existing Houthi capabilities. In other words, Iran and Hezbollah have played a significant role in the improvement of Houthi battlefield performance since 2015.

Aviation Drones

The Houthis have used aviation drones for both reconnaissance and kamikaze missions. Most are assembled from knockdown kits imported from abroad. As Hezbollah has discovered in its many clashes with the Israel Defense Forces, drones offer important advantages over ballistic missiles in an attack mode. First of all, they are much smaller and therefore

easier to smuggle; this is an important consideration for the Houthis, who face a blockade. Drones are also harder to detect in flight than ballistic missiles, since they can approach their targets below radar. Above all else, drones are relatively cheap. The components that go into constructing Houthi drones probably cost $1,000 or $2,000 at most. This is considerably less than the $3 million Saudi Patriot surface-to-air missile (SAM) that may be used against them.[31]

The Houthi Qasef-1 bears a striking resemblance to the Iranian Ababil family of drones. The Houthis have periodically used the Qasef-1 to attack Saudi and Emirati Patriot SAM batteries. Again, the asymmetries in cost and technology are very much to the advantage of the drone operator.[32]

Unmanned Explosive Boats

A Houthi attack on the Saudi frigate *Al-Madina* is described at the beginning of this chapter. In that attack, which involved an unmanned explosive boat, two of the *Al-Madina* crew were killed and, undoubtedly, several more injured.[33] Vice Adm. Kevin Donegan, the commander at the time of the U.S. Fifth Fleet in Bahrain, pointed to some of the difficulties of unmanned explosive boats and their implications: “That’s not an easy thing to develop. There have been many terrorist groups that have tried to develop that, it’s not something that was just invented by the Houthis. There’s clearly support coming from others, so that’s problematic.”[34] Admiral Donegan believed that Iran provided the explosive boat used in the *Al-Madina* strike.[35]

In addition to the *Al-Madina*, the Houthis have twice attempted to use explosive boats against oil-industry targets. On 25 April 2017, the Houthis launched an unmanned explosive boat at Saudi Arabia’s Jizan oil terminal on the Red Sea. Fortunately for the Saudis, their coast guard intercepted the boat before it reached its target.[36] On 24 July 2018, the Houthis conducted another explosive-boat strike, this time successfully, against the Saudi-flagged very large crude carrier *Arsan*. As in the *Al-Madina* attack, the explosive boat struck the *Arsan*’s stern, where the rudder and propeller were, and temporarily disabled the ship. After this incident, the Saudi state shipping line suspended tanker transits through the Bab al-Mandeb pending

a review of security procedures. Later, forensics analysis revealed that the Houthis had used a warhead from a 1960s-vintage SS-N-2 Styx antiship cruise missile as the explosive.[37]

Sea Mines

Sea mines have long been recognized as the ideal weapon for coastal waters or maritime passages like the Strait of Hormuz and Bab al-Mandeb, so it should be no surprise that they have played a role in the Houthis' war on Saudi and international shipping. According to the United Nations Panel of Experts on Yemen, "Sea mines are low cost, easy to deploy, tactically very effective, difficult to detect and thus are a potent threat to both naval and commercial vessels. Relatively small quantities present a threat out of proportion to their numbers."[38]

In March 2017, the U.S. Office of Naval Intelligence publicly warned that Houthis or other militias might be seeding the Bab al-Mandeb with sea mines. In one relatively early example, Houthi-laid sea mines near the port of Mokha on the Red Sea sank a Yemeni coast guard boat.[39] A year later, Saudi officials reported that they had disarmed more than eighty Houthi sea mines in the Red Sea since 2015.[40] In that period the Houthis became even more bold in their use of sea mines. In November 2020, a probable sea mine struck the Greek-flagged tanker MT *Agrari* as it lay moored at the Saudi terminal of Shuqaiq. Shuqaiq is some 160 kilometers (100 miles) from the Yemeni border.[41]

Antiship Cruise Missiles

The government of Yemen possessed an inventory of antiship cruise missiles (ASCM) prior to the Houthi capture of Sanaa in 2014, among them the SS-N-2 Styx and the Chinese (or Iranian knockoff) C-801. The Houthis probably captured several ASCMs during their sweep across western Yemen in 2014–15, but it is much less likely that they knew how to operate them, especially the target-acquisition radars. This deficiency provided a potential entrée for Iranian or Hezbollah experts, who were familiar with both ASCM variants.[42]

Iran had proliferated the C-802 Noor system to its Hezbollah proxy in the early 2000s. During the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, two Iranian-origin C-802s were fired at the Israeli navy corvette *Hanit*, killing four and causing extensive damage to the flight deck and propulsion systems. With that recent experience in mind, either Hezbollah or the Qods Force helped the Houthis refurbish and operate older Yemeni navy C-801s. In addition, the longer-range C-802 was shipped from Iran to Yemen in knockdown kits.[43] In November 2019, a boat's crew from the USS *Forrest Sherman* (DDG 98) discovered a C-802 on a dhow headed for Yemen.[44]

On 1 October 2016, a probable C-802, which would have been launched from the shore, struck the HSV-2 *Swift*, a high-speed catamaran that had been chartered by the United Arab Emirates to provide logistics support to its forces deployed in Yemen. The ship had just transited the Bab al-Mandeb when it was hit. Houthi assertions to the contrary, the *Swift* was not "destroyed," although there was extensive damage to its bridge.[45]

The United States responded to the *Swift* attack by sending the USS *Mason* (DDG 87) USS *Nitze* (DDG 94), and USS *Ponce* (AFSB[I] 15) on a "freedom of navigation" mission through the Bab al-Mandeb. In three separate incidents (9, 12, and 15 October 2016) the Houthis fired probable C-802s at them. None of the ASCMs hit their intended targets, owing variously to ship defenses, decoys, and defects in the missiles or their targeting systems. The United States retaliated with sea-launched Tomahawk cruise-missile strikes on Houthi coastal-defense radar facilities.[46]

Two years later, on 3 April 2018, a probable Houthi C-802 struck the Saudi tanker *Abqaiq*, which was eighty-eight kilometers from shore. Later investigations pointed to the probable Houthi use of skiffs or dhows to locate the *Abqaiq* and relay its GPS location to Houthi ASCM batteries on shore.[47]

Ballistic Missiles

The Houthis have fired hundreds of surface-to-surface missiles (SSMs) since 2015 at Saudi coalition bases, cities, and economic infrastructure.[48] Like the antiship cruise missile, the ballistic missile is a sophisticated

weapon to develop, build, and operate. It seems highly unlikely that the Houthis could have built many of the SSMs they have used with indigenous resources alone. Moreover, there is a growing body of evidence pointing to a probable Iranian role in the Houthi ballistic-missile program.

It is true that the pre-Houthi Yemen military possessed a few hundred Scud or Scud-derivative missiles, as well as the highly accurate Soviet-built SS-21 Scarab.[49] The Houthis captured some of these weapons and used them against their enemies, probably with help from former Yemeni army experts. In addition to these missiles, the Houthis have also been using ballistic missiles that bear a very close resemblance to the Iranian Zelzal and Qiam systems. The Houthi Borkan 2H, for example, is most likely an Iranian Qiam-1.[50] The Qods Force reportedly smuggled several Qiam-1s into Houthi-held areas in 2016 or 2017. Given their size, it is likely that these missiles were disassembled in Iran and then reassembled at their Yemeni destinations.

On 22 July 2017, the Houthis fired a Borkan 2H/Qiam-1 missile at the Saudi Arabian Oil Company (ARAMCO) oil refinery in Yanbu. This missile flew more than six hundred miles before its warhead impacted in the desert three miles from the refinery.[51] Again, this would have been an unprecedented accomplishment had this weapon been in fact an indigenous Yemeni design. An astonishing one, too, since the Houthis had demonstrated nothing near the technological ability to design, build, and test a complex system like this.

On 4 November 2017, the Houthis fired another Borkan 2H, this time at the King Khalid International Airport near Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The Saudis fired four Patriot SAMs at it, and at least one hit; debris from the impact fell on the city. The warhead itself had already detached but fell short of the airport.[52]

The U.S. Department of State estimated in 2019 that the Houthis had launched more than 250 SSMs at Saudi Arabia since 2015.[53] Some of these were the captured Scuds and Scarabs, but others were undoubtedly Iranian in provenance. It was an impressive feat of Qods Force logistics to have smuggled weapons of this size and sophistication into Houthi-held Yemen through an international air, land, and sea blockade.

THE “FOURTH ARAB CAPITAL”

By 2017–18 the Saudi coalition had become mired in Yemen’s intractable sectarian, regional, and tribal conflicts. The Saudis and their allies could not dislodge the Houthis from their heartland—Sanaa, al-Hodeida, Taizz, and Saada. Moreover, the withdrawal of the Emirati forces in 2019 made the Saudi war aims all but impossible to achieve. Thanks to their access to Iranian weapons and technical expertise, the Houthis had raised the costs for Saudi Arabia of any semblance of victory. Drone and missile strikes on oil production, water desalination plants, and airports had brought those costs home directly to the Saudi public.

Given all this, it is easy to see why Iranian officials gloated about Yemen as a success story. One went so far as to call Sanaa the “fourth Arab capital” under Tehran’s control (the others being Baghdad, Damascus, and Beirut).[54] For his part, Qassem Soleimani openly taunted both Riyadh and Washington in a 27 July 2018 speech: “One group in Yemen [Houthis] has been victorious against the most advanced military equipment of yours. What have you achieved? The Red Sea which used to be secure has become insecure. … Riyadh and Saudi Arabia … are under fire today. There is no single night that we sleep without thinking of how to destroy you.”[55]

Caught up in competing priorities—the Korean Peninsula, the South China Sea, and an imploding Venezuela, not to mention Syria and Iraq—the U.S. government did what it could in Yemen. In December 2019, Washington offered a $15 million reward for information on the elusive Abdul Reza Shahlai, believed to be in Yemen.[56] A few weeks later, after Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Mohandis were killed in Baghdad by an American drone, the American media revealed that a similar effort to kill Shahlai in Yemen had failed.[57]

A SUMMING-UP

More than Iraq, Syria, or even Lebanon, Yemen epitomizes the Qods Force’s unconventional-warfare strategy. It is a proxy war on the cheap. A small group of Qods Force and Hezbollah advisers has transformed the Houthi militia into an impressive fighting force at little cost in Iranian lives or treasure. When measured against the estimated five or six billion dollars the Saudis spend *per month* on a stalemate in Yemen, the Iranian investment

seems money and effort well spent.[58] The Houthis have tied down Saudi military resources in a counterinsurgency war for which Riyadh has neither training nor equipment. In addition, Yemen has diverted Saudi attention from countries of greater concern to Tehran, like Iraq, Syria, or Lebanon. At the same time, the Houthi war has allowed Iran's Revolutionary Guards to test their Strait of Hormuz closure strategy under real-world conditions with little or no risk to Tehran. Iran no doubt developed most of the weapons encountered in the Bab al-Mandeb in recent years with the Strait of Hormuz in mind.

Some analysts have warned that Iran intends to convert the Houthis into another Hezbollah-type organization, one that acknowledges Iranian leadership in return for a steady supply of advanced weaponry and money.[59] There may be some truth to this: as noted, the Houthis' capabilities in administration and internal security suggest a more disciplined and streamlined organization than existed in the recent past. Still, the Houthis are not likely to fill the same kind of proxy role that Hezbollah does in Lebanon. It is difficult to imagine a superior/subordinate relationship between Tehran and the notoriously prickly and independent-minded Houthis. As one Yemen expert tellingly put it, "The al Houthis may mean more to Iran than Iran does to the al Houthis."[60] Above all else, the Houthis' ultimate objectives are different from Iran's, the weakening of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The Houthis do want the Saudis out of Yemen, but they also seek international recognition and Yemeni stability, on their own terms.

PART V

The Levant

19
Allies to Adversaries

In their modern incarnations, Iran and Israel are both heirs to ancient civilizations that date back to the dawn of recorded history. They have more than two millennia of dealings with each other, and in a region where historical memory borders on the neurotic they can claim a far longer heritage of mutual statecraft than any of their neighbors, with the exceptions of Egypt and Yemen. In his book *Treacherous Alliance* the American academic Trita Parsi addresses the similarities between Iran and Israel, however ironic given their seemingly never-ending confrontation: "In many ways, they are more alike than different. Both tend to view themselves as somewhat superior to their Arab neighbors. Many Iranians think of the Arabs … as culturally inferior; as brutes, who had the good fortune to have Persians as neighbors who could civilize and refine them."[1]

In the reign of Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, Iran-Israel relations were low-key and cordial but nearly always governed by the dictates of realpolitik. The shah was not immersed in the Palestinian question, which suited the Israelis, who were anxious to break out of their regional isolation. Iran sold oil to Israel, and the Mossad (see chapter 6) helped organize and train the shah's secret police, SAVAK. Both were concerned about the rise of Arab nationalism and the changes it was bringing to the regional power balance. As a result, Iran and Israel joined Turkey and eventually Ethiopia in an anti-Arab intelligence pact called Trident, which existed until the 1979 Iranian Revolution.[2]

KHOMEINI'S AVERSION

Next to the shah and the United States, Israel was the most frequent target of Ayatollah Khomeini's invective. In his work *Islamic Government* Khomeini reserved plenty of space for his opinions about Israel and the supposed influence it exerted over Iran: "So extensive is the influence of Israel in our country—Israel, which is in a state of war with the Muslims … [—] and so great is the support the [shah] gives it, that Israeli soldiers come to our country for training! Our country has become a base for them! The markets of our country are also in their hands."[3]

At the same time that he pilloried Israel as a "cancer" in the Middle East, Khomeini voiced frequent support for Palestinian nationalist aspirations. Starting in the 1960s, the Palestine Liberation Organization took up the mantle of national liberation via armed force. An umbrella organization of factions, the PLO reflected the dominant ideologies in the Arab world at the time: nationalism, socialism, communism, and secularism. The Islamist current was relatively weak in the Palestinian political arena during the 1960s and 1970s; however, the Muslim Brotherhood was making inroads in the Israeli-occupied territories and the Palestinian diaspora, inroads that would yield fruit in the 1980s and beyond.[4]

PLO chairman Yasser Arafat visited Khomeini at least twice during the ayatollah's exile in Najaf, and one consequence of these meetings was an agreement to train some of Khomeini's followers at PLO camps in Lebanon. By 1979, when Khomeini was swept into power by Iran's revolution, the PLO had trained hundreds of his most ardent supporters, including his sons. Not surprisingly, many of them, like Mohsen Rafiqdoost and Mohammed Montazeri, would help form the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (see chapters 1 and 2).[5] As the shah's government collapsed in late 1978, the Israelis shuttered their de facto embassy in Tehran and fled the country. They saw the writing on the wall: within days of Ayatollah Khomeini's triumphant return, Arafat became the first foreign leader he granted an audience.[6] The PLO took possession of the Israeli diplomatic facilities and sent in a team to train the ayatollah's bodyguards. Together with Syrian officials, PLO intelligence and security experts began training the new Iranian intelligence agencies that were to replace SAVAK. Until those agencies were capable of conducting foreign operations on their own,

the PLO spied on emerging Iranian dissident organizations abroad and shared its reports with Tehran.[7]

The PLO-Iran honeymoon did not last long, however. One major problem was ideology. The PLO was comprised factions with socialist and communist bents but excluded Islamist parties, who promoted a very different vision of the future Palestinian state. Nor did the PLO's response to the Iraqi invasion of Iran help, as Arafat wavered between responding to Saddam Hussein's pleas for Arab unity and avoiding the conflict altogether. Neither position impressed Khomeini, especially since Syria had taken the risk of siding with Iran and thereby provided the PLO "top cover" to do the same.[8]

In any case, the Islamic Republic had plenty to occupy its energies throughout the 1980s, including the war with Iraq, building up Hezbollah in Lebanon, and confronting the United States for control of the Persian Gulf. To be sure, Tehran frequently played up anti-Israeli themes in its propaganda, but at the same time it was buying weapons covertly from Israel.[9] The reality was that, propaganda aside, Tehran had little influence over the Palestinian issue, notwithstanding that its embassy in Damascus was a clearinghouse for contacts with various PLO and non-PLO factions. As official custodian of the Hezbollah and Palestinian portfolios in the Iranian government, the IRGC Intelligence Directorate forged close ties with Ahmed Jibril's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine–General Command (PFLP-GC). It was also keeping a close eye on another promising faction, Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ).

JIHAD IN PALESTINE

Unlike in Lebanon there were few Shias among the Palestinians, so the Revolutionary Guards reworked their message, dropping references to *Velayat-e Faqih*, promoting a "Palestine Day" during the month of Ramadan, and playing up Khomeini's many anti-Israeli diatribes. All this helped make Iran a natural ally of Palestinian extremists, both religious and secular, but the Revolutionary Guards' greatest success was with the PIJ.

The PIJ dates back to the 1970s, when a group of Palestinian students in Egypt fell under the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood and its strident message of Sunni revival. The PIJ's founder and first leader, Fathi al-Aziz

al-Shikaki, was also inspired by the writings of Ayatollah Khomeini and the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which put theories of an Islamic state into actual practice.[10] By the early 1980s, after its expulsion from Egypt, the PIJ planted its roots in the Gaza Strip; however, unlike its Palestinian rivals, it never created a mass following or built schools or medical clinics. Instead, the PIJ was small, cellular, and elitist, dedicated to the idea that high-visibility terrorist attacks would galvanize Palestinians into a revolt that would destroy the Israeli state.[11] The PIJ's singular dedication to Israel's eradication through terrorism and its support for Iran during the Iran-Iraq War attracted IRGC interest in the mid-1980s. At that time, Iran was searching for an effective and reliable Palestinian Islamist proxy to spearhead the export of its revolution to Israel's occupied territories, and PIJ had potential for that role.[12] Shikaki would later admit that the first transfers of Iranian funds to his organization occurred in 1987, shortly before the first Palestinian Intifada (uprising).[13]

In 1988, the Israelis expelled Shikaki and other PIJ leaders to Lebanon. This turned out to be a mistake; it gave the IRGC's Lebanon Corps direct access to the PIJ leadership. The IRGC helped transfer the organization's headquarters to Damascus. By the early 1990s the PIJ's armed wing, the al-Quds Brigades, was training at Hezbollah camps and participating in Hezbollah operations against the Israelis under the watchful eye of the Qods Force.[14] More importantly for the Iranian-backed terrorism campaign against Israel, the Qods Force and Iranian Intelligence helped the PIJ hone its clandestine skills and create militant cells inside the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

When the First Intifada appeared to be running out of steam in 1990, the PIJ switched tactics from participation in mass protests to terrorism against Israel. In this it had the full backing of the IRGC.[15] Eventually, PIJ terrorism against Israeli civilians and military targets convinced the Israeli leadership that assassinating Fathi al-Shikaki would not only decapitate the PIJ but stop its terror campaign as well. On 26 October 1995, the Mossad assassinated al-Shikaki in Malta, which he often used as a transit point en route to Libya. Shikaki was quickly replaced by Ramadan Shalah, but PIJ's terrorist efforts were effectively derailed, and the group's fortunes did not revive until the Second Intifada began in September 2000.[16]

HAMAS HESITATES

The Islamic Resistance Movement—more widely known by its Arabic acronym Hamas—was founded in 1987 by a charismatic, wheelchair-bound preacher named Ahmed Yassin. Although Hamas and its smaller rival PIJ were both inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas explicitly rejected Khomeini's *Velayat-e Faqih* ideology and pursued mass politics through social and economic uplift. As a result, Hamas was active on multiple "resistance" fronts, including education and health care as well as terrorist violence against Israel. For several years in the late 1980s, Iranian intelligence officers tried to cultivate Hamas as an ally in Tehran's larger war against Israel, but Sheikh Yassin was suspicious of Iranian intentions and discouraged cooperation.[17]

Saddam Hussein's 1990 invasion of Kuwait and its aftermath were game-changers for the Middle East. The American success in forging a large international coalition that expelled Saddam from Kuwait was partly based on Washington's promises that it would launch a regional peace process after Iraq's defeat. Indeed, the Madrid Peace Conference produced bilateral peace talks between Israel, Jordan, Syria, and the PLO. One country not invited to Madrid was Iran, because of its reputation as a state sponsor of terrorism. Relegated to outsider status and confronted by peace initiatives inimical to their interests, the Iranians created their own "International Committee for the Support of the Palestinian Intifada" that consisted of themselves, Hezbollah, Palestinian extremists, and, eventually, Hafez al-Asad's Syria.[18]

In December 1992, the Israelis reprised their mistake of expelling Palestinian extremists—in this case Hamas—to southern Lebanon. As they had with the PIJ in 1988, the Iranians and Hezbollah used the opportunity to establish direct contacts with the exiled Hamas leadership. The Qods Force and Hezbollah's Islamic Jihad Organization set up a training camp in southern Lebanon, where they trained selected Hamas operatives in intelligence, counterintelligence, small arms, rocket artillery, communications, and encryption. The result was a quantum leap in Hamas' clandestine and military capabilities.[19]

While its fighters were being trained in Lebanese camps, the Hamas leadership put aside some of its mistrust of Tehran and accepted Iranian aid.

In October 1992 a Hamas delegation visited Tehran, where it was offered $30 million in annual aid and more training in Iran and Lebanon. But there was a quid pro quo, that Hamas coordinate with the PIJ and launch suicide operations against Israel. The then Qods Force commander, Brigadier Vahidi, tasked Imad Mughniyah's Islamic Jihad Organization with funneling Iranian money and intelligence to the Palestinian extremists and training some of their more promising fighters in bomb making.[20]

The ironic impetus for renewed terrorism against Israel was a tangible prospect of regional peace. In 1993, the Israelis and the PLO concluded a mutual-recognition treaty under the auspices of the Oslo Accords. Months later, Jordan became the second Arab country (after Egypt) to conclude a peace treaty with Israel. There were even negotiations between Iran's old ally Syria and Israel over a possible land-for-peace swap involving the Golan Heights. Iran had good reason to be concerned: if the Syria-Israel talks resulted in a peace treaty, Damascus would have to stop supporting Palestinian extremist groups and disarm Hezbollah. This would effectively thwart Iran's plan to project power into the Levant and undermine its legitimacy as a pan-Islamic power. There was plenty of reason, then, for Iran, the Qods Force, Hezbollah, PIJ, and Hamas to do what they could to derail Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Syrian peace talks.[21]

The regional peace process was in fact all but destroyed in the middle to late 1990s, by a combination of factors. The main one was a nine-day spree of Hamas and PIJ suicide bombings in 1996 that killed fifty-nine Israelis. The others were the Palestinian Authority's perfidy, incompetence, and corruption; Yasser Arafat's unabashed opportunism; Israeli politics; and Syrian stubbornness. But the Qods Force and its Hezbollah ally played their parts too, especially by constantly pressuring the Palestinians to conduct more suicide bombings against the Israelis and providing the means to do so.[22] As historian Ronen Bergman puts it, "The wave of terror in February and March 1996 was a case study in how suicide attacks could alter the course of history."[23]

THE SECOND INTIFADA

When the Second Intifada erupted in September 2000, the Arafat-led Palestinian Authority found itself in open confrontation with the Israeli

government, its erstwhile “partner for peace.” Iran was clearly pleased by the failure of the peace process, especially its Israel-Syria track, which could have seriously threatened Iranian plans for regional dominance. As new waves of unrest swept over Gaza and the West Bank, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei issued a fatwa permitting cooperation between Iranian state agencies like the IRGC and Arafat’s Palestinian Authority (PA).[24] This fatwa effectively healed the rift, which went back to the early 1980s, in Iran’s relationship with Yasser Arafat’s al-Fatah. The Iranians and Hezbollah increasingly conditioned their aid on improved cooperation between Hamas and PIJ as well as with the PA.[25]

When Palestinian unrest in the occupied territories escalated during the early 2000s, Tehran and Imad Mughniyah seemed to be attempting to transfer the “Hezbollah Model” to the Palestinian extremist groups.[26] Such an approach would have entailed a disciplined, organized, nonstate Iranian proxy equipped with weapons that only states normally possessed, such as ballistic and cruise missiles, artillery rockets, tanks, and surfaceto-air missile systems. In 2006, Qassem Soleimani explicitly held up Hezbollah as a model for the Palestinians: “Following Hizballah’s victory in Lebanon, a new Middle East has emerged, not an American Mideast, but an Islamic one. Parallel to the formation of jihadist groups in Palestine … Hizballah has succeeded in exporting to Palestine the model for a believers’ way of life. Hizballah has played a central role in turning the stones of the Palestinians into missiles.”[27]

But Soleimani was too optimistic. There were two major obstacles to creating a “Palestinian Hezbollah” in the occupied territories. One was the fractious nature of the Palestinians themselves, as evidenced by the plethora of groups they had formed—Fatah, the PFLP-GC, Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Hamas, and PIJ—all feuding over ideology and the nature of armed struggle. Another hurdle was the geopolitical isolation of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank (see map 7). Hezbollah could rely on a steady stream of Iranian weapons coming through Syrian territory; it was much harder for either the Qods Force or Hezbollah to funnel arms to the territories. This problem of logistics was almost insurmountable, given the effectiveness of the Israeli patrols of the waters and airspace. One alternative, which Lebanese Hezbollah attempted, was infiltrating weapons via Syria into Jordan; the difficult part was getting these weapons through

Israeli border security checkpoints into the West Bank.[28] The only other possibility was Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, which shared a border with the Gaza Strip. For years, Egyptian border guards sympathetic to the plight of Gazans had turned a blind eye to the construction of smugglers' tunnels linking Gaza with North Sinai. During the 1990s and, especially after 2005, when Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon dismantled Israeli settlements in Gaza, the Qods Force and Hezbollah used these tunnels to funnel arms to Hamas and PIJ.[29]

On 3 January 2002, Israeli commandos boarded the MV *Karine A* in the Red Sea. The vessel, which had departed from Iran's Kish Island in the Persian Gulf a few weeks earlier, intended to transit the Suez Canal and push its waterproofed cargo overboard in shallow water near the Egyptian town of Al Arish in northern Sinai. The Israelis discovered on board a carefully disguised arsenal consisting of 122-mm Katyusha rockets and launchers, 80-mm mortar rounds, AT-3 Sagger antitank guided missiles, antitank and antipersonnel mines, and more than two and a half tons of explosives. The Israelis contended that the shipment was intended for the Palestinian Authority in contravention of the Oslo Accords; others suggested Hezbollah as a possible destination. Either way, the Iran angle seemed to be fairly definitive, since the weapons bore Iranian markings (although some had been deliberately, if inefficiently, removed) and the manifest indicated a stopover at Kish.[30]

YASSIN ASSASSINATION

On 22 March 2004, an Israeli AH-64 Apache helicopter fired Hellfire antitank guided missiles at a car convoy in Gaza, killing the Hamas leader, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin. Scarcely a month later the Israelis assassinated Yassin's successor too. The Israelis had rewritten the rules of their eternal blood feud with the Palestinians and forced Hamas to stop temporarily the suicide-bombing campaign.

Clearly, the Israelis had won a victory over Hamas, but victories in the Middle East are often ephemeral and generate new and even more lethal conflicts in their wake. By killing Yassin the Israelis had removed the Hamas leader most opposed to an expanded Hamas relationship with Iran. Yassin's eventual long-term successor, Khaled Mashaal, had a less

jaundiced view of the Iranians and allowed the Qods Force and Hezbollah to step up their training of Hamas fighters.[31]

Between 2006 and 2009, when the Israelis tried to bludgeon Hamas into submission in its Gaza enclave, Qods Force officers clandestinely entered Gaza via smugglers' tunnels from Egypt. The Iranian operatives helped Hamas develop, produce, and eventually use various kinds of rockets, in a replay of the Hezbollah experience in Lebanon. In addition, the Qods Force and Hezbollah provided intelligence training, communications interception equipment, and expertise in underground facilities.[32] Then there was the Iranian financial assistance to Hamas. Although the reported amounts vary widely, it is safe to conclude that Iranian money helped Hamas buy the influence necessary to win the 25 January 2006 Palestinian legislative elections. Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh was now Palestinian prime minister, and one of his first foreign trips was to Tehran, where he received a pledge of $250 million in aid. "Iran is the Palestinians' strategic depth," Haniyeh declared, words that must have been music to Qassem Soleimani's ears.[33]

MAP 7. Qods Force Arms Transfers to Hamas and PIJ

WHY PALESTINE?

In his memoir on the lost Middle East peace process of the 1990s, Martin Indyk, a former U.S. assistant secretary of state, pondered the question of Iran's ultimate objectives in fighting Israel to the last Arab in Palestine. After all, Iran historically had not played a major role in Arab-Israeli conflicts. In fact, as we have seen, the last shah maintained a low-key relationship with Israel until the last days of his reign. After the 1979 Revolution and throughout the 1980s Iran paid only lip service to Palestinian causes, having other preoccupations, like the war with Iraq and clashes with American forces in the Persian Gulf. Therefore, it was surprising to American policy makers when in the 1990s Iran adopted an

overtly hostile posture to the regional peace process. The reasons for this apparent volteface are intrinsic to Iran's perceptions of itself and its unsatisfied desire for regional leadership.

Clearly, the Iranians resented their exclusion from Madrid, although their only viable card to play at the table would have been sponsorship of Hezbollah and Palestinian extremists. Commitment to Ayatollah's Khomeini's promises of liberating Jerusalem from the Israelis played well with those who helped choose his successor, Ali Khamenei. Moreover, after eight years of inconclusive war with Iraq, the Iranians understood that Israel was the most powerful of their regional enemies. Therefore, ensnaring the Israelis in wars with proxies was in Tehran's larger national interests: it diluted and diverted Israeli military power that otherwise might have been focused on Iran. Of course, those same proxies also came in handy when Iran needed to thwart any regional peace negotiation that excluded Iranian equities. Finally, the Palestinian issue helped legitimize Shiite Iran in regional affairs: Iran could afford to be more Palestinian than the Arabs—or even the Palestinians themselves, for that matter. In reality, Iran suffered little or no blowback from its proxy wars in the Levant. The final word here belongs to Ambassador Indyk: "We did not imagine that [the Iranians] would view our peacemaking efforts as such a threat to their interests, because we did not understand that their hegemonic ambitions stretched beyond the Gulf to the Sunni heartland of the Middle East."[34]

20
Encircled

In the spring of 2006, the Qods Force leadership had good cause for optimism with regard to Iran's hard-won position in the Levant. With Syria, Hezbollah, Palestine Islamic Jihad, and Hamas, Qassem Soleimani's team had forged a coalition that encircled Israel on its northern, eastern, and southern borders. The Qods Force had accelerated arms deliveries to Hezbollah and helped build elaborate new defensive fortifications in southern Lebanon in anticipation of renewed war with the Israel Defense Forces. The resulting 2006 Lebanon War not only damaged the IDF's reputation for invincibility but also, by extension, undermined Israel's ability to deter aggression from Iran, Syria, Hamas, and Hezbollah.

THREATS

In 2006, the Israelis confronted a Hezbollah organization that was disciplined and extraordinarily well armed. Indeed, it would still be after the 2006 war with Israel, when both the Qods Force and the Syrian government would replace all its losses. In addition to its formidable army, Hezbollah was organized and efficient in a way that no Lebanese state agencies were.[1] With an annual infusion of Iranian cash estimated at $200 million to $700 million per year and earnings from smuggling drugs, trafficking in blood diamonds (i.e., mined in rebel-held areas), and counterfeiting, Hezbollah had ample financial resources with which to influence Lebanese politics. In addition, the Israelis and the Americans had learned to respect Hezbollah's external-operations arm, whose global terrorist reach not only deterred

Israeli escalation against Hezbollah but may also have inhibited the United States and Israel from attacking Iran's controversial nuclear program.

To the northeast, Israel faced a hostile Syria across the strategic Golan Heights. Since peace talks with Israel had failed in the late 1990s, Syrian president Bashar al-Asad had reaffirmed his support for the Iranian alliance. Indeed, as the Israelis understood better than most, Syria was vital to the entire Iranian power system in the Levant. It enabled the Qods Force to deliver large amounts of advanced weaponry to Hezbollah and Palestinian rejectionists. Syria also had a large military of its own, including ballistic missiles and chemical warheads. In 2007, the Israeli air force (IAF) had destroyed a secret Syrian nuclear facility built with assistance from Iran and North Korea.[2]

Finally, there was the threat from the Hamas-run Gaza Strip. We have already seen how both Hamas and PIJ benefited from Iranian financial and military assistance during the Second Intifada and afterward. Qods Force operatives had infiltrated into Gaza via tunnels that extended into Egypt's poorly guarded North Sinai governorate. These Qods Force advisers helped Hamas develop crude rockets that would be used in future conflicts with Israel.

Iran was the common denominator of these threats. To put a finer point on it, Iran's Qods Force was spearheading efforts to export the Iranian Revolution to the Levant while at the same time forging a network of state allies (Syria), well-armed surrogates (Hezbollah and PIJ), and influential quasi-state entities (Hamas). All the network's elements had the same objective: weakening and eventually destroying Israel. For its part, Tehran viewed its allies as pawns in its confrontation with the international community over nuclear weapons.

LEBANON'S MORASS

Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon expelled the PLO from that country and inflicted a humiliating defeat on the Syrians. But the Israelis failed to impose a lasting peace settlement on Lebanon, and their eviction of the PLO formed a vacuum that the Iranian-backed Hezbollah filled. Also, as the Israelis learned, leaving Lebanon was harder than invading it. Between 1985 and 2000 the IDF was obliged to maintain, with the aid of a local

Lebanese ally, a security zone in southern Lebanon with the sole purpose of shielding northern Israel from Katyusha rockets. IDF patrols there, however, were persistently ambushed by Hezbollah.

As long as Israel occupied Lebanese land, Hezbollah felt justified in maintaining its militia when other Lebanese paramilitaries had disarmed under the 1989 Taif Peace Accords. Moreover, Hezbollah and its Palestinian allies, Hamas and PIJ, gained valuable combat experience fighting the IDF in the security zone.[3] Hezbollah experimented with new tactics and weapons like IEDs, artillery rockets, and antitank guided missiles (ATGMs). For the Qods Force, the IDF's trauma in the security zone—256 Israelis died there between 1985 and 2000—reinforced its evolving strategy of inflicting death on an opponent through a thousand cuts.[4]

LAYING THE TRAP

On 24 May 2000, the IDF unilaterally withdrew from its Lebanese security zone. When the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) refused to take its place, Hezbollah proclaimed victory and deployed its forces to the border with Israel.[5] Moreover, Hezbollah rejected the Israeli premise that Hezbollah now had no reason to continue its "resistance" to Israeli "occupation," Israel having withdrawn from all Lebanese territory. In October 2000 Hezbollah ambushed an IDF position at Shabaa Farms, at the foot of Mount Hermon, and kidnapped three soldiers. Israel and the United Nations argued that Shabaa Farms belonged to Syria and were therefore subject to a future Israeli-Syrian peace treaty; however, Hezbollah, Lebanon, and Syria insisted it was Lebanese. That meant Israel still occupied Lebanese land, they concluded, and Hezbollah's "resistance" would continue.[6]

When Hezbollah moved into the recently vacated security zone, it did so with a very specific objective in mind. Together with a Qods Force advisory team led by Brigadier Mir Faysal Baqerzadeh and some North Korean engineers, Hezbollah began secretly building a sophisticated, interlinked series of deep underground facilities.[7] Miles of tunnels connected commandand-control nodes, arsenals, food storage sites, water cisterns, medical facilities, and sleeping quarters for thousands of Hezbollah fighters. Katyusha rocket launchers mounted on pneumatic lifts could rise out of the

ground, release a salvo of rockets, and then descend again before IDF counterbattery fire could destroy them.[8]

The Qods Force also contributed to these secret bunkers in another way. Iranian money and communications experts had laid down miles of buried fiber-optic cable that linked the south Lebanon defensive fortifications with the organization's nerve center in Beirut.[9] This system of redundant (i.e., with backup and casualty modes), secure communications would serve Hezbollah well in the 2006 war, especially in the calibrated use of Katyusha rockets against Israel.[10] According to a RAND Corporation study commissioned after the war, "not a single Hezbollah rocket landed in Israel at any time" during a mutually agreed two-day cease-fire.[11]

Throughout the first decade of the new millennium, Qods Force logisticians in Damascus and Zabadani in Syria, the Bekaa Valley, and southern Lebanon funneled a steady flow of arms and other materiel from Iran to Hezbollah. At the apex of this operation was the head of the Qods Force Lebanon Corps, Brigadier Mohammed Ali Reza Zahedi. He not only served as Qassem Soleimani's eyes and ears in Lebanon but liaised with Hezbollah, interfaced routinely with Syrian counterparts, and supervised the training of Hezbollah combatants in Lebanon and Iran on new weapons systems and electronic intelligence equipment.[12]

In the months leading up to the 2006 war, Israeli intelligence picked up indications of accelerated weapons deliveries to Hezbollah.[13] From Iran were coming various unmanned aerial vehicles, Fajr-3 and Fajr-5 artillery rockets, the much larger Zelzal-1 and Zelzal-2 rockets, antitank guided missiles, and man-portable air-defense systems; there were hints of some kind of antiship missile as well.[14] The Syrians too were providing new kinds of weapons to Hezbollah. Unlike his father, Bashar al-Asad was willing to give Hezbollah sophisticated arms, like 220-mm and 302-mm rockets and the Russian AT-13 Metis-M and AT-14 Kornet-E ATGMs.[15]

The Qods Force Lebanon Corps also improved Hezbollah's already formidable intelligence and counterintelligence capabilities. In November 2005, Iran concluded an agreement with Syria that provided for the construction of four new signals-intelligence (SIGINT) stations in Syria to collect on Turkey, the coalition in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Israel. Two of the four stations were operational when the 2006 war began, and Hezbollah no doubt received intelligence from them.[16] During the war, Hezbollah, the

Qods Force, and Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security staffed a joint intelligence center in Damascus that assessed data from multiple sources.[17] Hezbollah also had a group of Hebrew translators who routinely monitored unencrypted IDF communications.[18]

The Qods Force and MOIS provided training to Hezbollah on operating Iranian electronic intelligence equipment and jammers. Moreover, Hezbollah communications security throughout the war was good, since most of its operational orders to frontline units were transmitted via Iranianfunded fiber-optic cables.[19] Frontline Hezbollah units that used radios employed Iranian frequency-hopping transmitters and a simple but effective encryption system.[20]

Both the Israelis and the Americans tried to stay abreast of the Qods Force supply chain to Hezbollah. In some cases, such as the transport of large-caliber artillery rockets, Israeli military intelligence (known as Aman) was able to track the shipments across the Syria-Lebanon border and into Hezbollah arsenals. Still, some weapons escaped detection, including the C-802 antiship cruise missiles that Iran was indeed providing, as suspected, and that gave Hezbollah a dramatic edge early in the war. In any case, the conclusion drawn from all this activity was unmistakable: Hezbollah and its allies were preparing for war with Israel. In a 2004 classified memorandum to the prime minister and defense minister, the Israeli Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee identified the alarming dimensions of the looming Hezbollah-Iran-Syrian threat:

> Iran, through Hizbollah and Syria, has placed Israel under a strategic threat that has no complete solution. The rockets deployed in south Lebanon have a quarter of the population of the state of Israel in their range, and this does not take into account the 220-mm rockets, which are also to be found in Lebanon today. If they are fired, these missiles will disrupt life in the entire country for several weeks, and bring tens of thousands of refugees from the north to the center and paralyze vital economic and security installations.[21]

WAR

There is no disputing the fact that Hezbollah provoked the war, by abducting two IDF soldiers and killing three more in a raid on the Lebanon-Israel border. Its secretary general, Hassan Nasrallah, would later admit that Hezbollah had miscalculated Israel's response.[22] Hezbollah had intended to trade its captives for fighters in Israeli jails.[23] Instead, it inadvertently crossed an Israeli red line, and the result was a thirty-four-day war that left much of southern Lebanon in ruins.

Finding itself in a conflict, Hezbollah intended to fight a limited war for limited ends. Its army was impressive by regional standards but not powerful enough to invade and occupy Israeli land, let alone defeat the IDF in the field. Instead, Hezbollah's objective was to absorb an anticipated Israeli offensive into south Lebanon, ensnare it in the newly built bunker complexes there, and bleed it out. Hezbollah also planned to use its one offensive asset aside from terrorism: 14,000 artillery rockets capable of reaching northern Israel.[24] As we have seen, Hezbollah also possessed short-range Katyushas and long-range rockets from Iran and Syria. All of these collectively represented a threat to settlements, towns, and cities in Israel, even if the rockets themselves were inaccurate and of limited military value.

The war began on 12 July 2006 when a Hezbollah team carried out the fatal ambush, killing three IDF soldiers and abducting two. The local IDF command sent a Merkava tank in pursuit; however, it ran over an antitank mine, causing the deaths of four more soldiers.[25] The Israeli air force quickly scrambled strike fighters that bombed bridges and roads leading north to Beirut with the goal of preventing Hezbollah from taking its captives to the Lebanese capital.[26] Prime Minister Ehud Olmert then escalated the conflict by unleashing the full strength of the IAF. Under Operation Change of Direction, Israeli fighters took advantage of years of painstaking intelligence work by Aman, Unit 8200 (Israel's SIGINT branch, see chapter 17), and the Mossad to target Hezbollah's command-and-control system and long-range rockets. The Israelis disabled or destroyed most of Hezbollah's long-range rockets (Fajrs, Syrian 220-mm and 302-mm) in the first hours of the war.[27] In doing so, the IAF effectively saved central Israel from attack by these weapons.

As the war unfolded, the Israelis also focused on Hezbollah supply links, which extended across the Lebanon-Syria border to the Qods Force garrison

at Zabadani and eastward to Damascus. On a number of occasions the IAF intercepted Iranian-sponsored arms convoys carrying more Fajrs and Katyushas to the battlefront in south Lebanon.[28] Throughout the war, Lebanese Hezbollah representatives met with senior Qods Force officers at the Iranian embassy in Damascus to plead for more weapons, especially air-defense missiles and rockets. Getting these weapons to the front fast enough to keep Hezbollah in the war must have been a formidable challenge for Qods Force logisticians in Syria and Lebanon.[29]

Still, these victories aside, the Israelis could not stop Hezbollah from firing short-range Katyusha rockets into northern Israel. The key to Hezbollah's success lay in the mobility of some of the Katyusha launchers and the relative sanctuary afforded by underground bunkers. Indeed, Hezbollah fired 720 Katyushas into Israel during the first week alone; two weeks later, the organization was still firing an average of 170 Katyushas per day in the face of repeated IAF air strikes and IDF counterbattery fire. Repeated Katyusha salvoes forced more than a million Israeli civilians into bomb shelters or south to the relative safety of central Israel.[30]

In addition to its use of rockets as an asymmetric alternative to vastly more expensive jet fighters, Hezbollah proved to be a master in the information arena as well. Although the IAF tried to bomb the studios of Hezbollah's Al-Manar Television, the outlet continued to function. Its constant broadcasts of destroyed Lebanese buildings and bridges, not to mention the suffering of Lebanon's homeless civilians, helped turn Arab public opinion firmly in Hezbollah's favor by the end of the war.[31] Nasrallah once again showed a flair for public relations when on the night of 14 July he instructed his viewers on Al-Manar to look westward to the Mediterranean: "The vessel that bombed Beirut will now be demolished," he announced just as an Iranian C-802 ASCM struck an Israeli corvette offshore, killing four.[32] This coup de theatre was unmatched by Israel and had important consequences for the war's endgame. The RAND Corporation later pointed to Hezbollah's skill in information operations as an important part of its success in the 2006 war: "The IAF's failure to neutralize this crucial enemy asset once and for all allowed Hezbollah to dominate the battle of narratives throughout the campaign and, after the fighting ended, to create an enduring perception among its people and throughout the Arab world that it had emerged the winner."[33]

By early August the Israelis realized that their strike fighters, attack helicopters, and artillery could not suppress Hezbollah's seemingly inexhaustible supply of Katyushas. For an Israeli civilian population accustomed to fighting most of its conventional wars in neighboring countries, the constant explosions of Katyushas was a disquieting reminder that the rules of war had changed yet again. Something different was needed.[34]

The fact was that Israel was running out of time to inflict its muchanticipated "death blow" to Hezbollah: the United Nations Security Council passed a resolution on 11 August that called for a cease-fire by the 14th. At this point, the Israelis launched a ground offensive into the dry, sun-parched hills and riverbeds of southern Lebanon to seize the objectives that had survived the IAF's precision strikes and roll back the Katyusha launchers. The IDF had only three days until the cease-fire came into effect, and, unbeknownst to the Israeli generals, a carefully planned Hezbollah ambush awaited.

After crossing the Israel-Lebanon border the IDF made little progress against Hezbollah's underground bunker complexes and integrated "freefire zones" (i.e., in which any detected target may be fired on without specific clearance). Many Israeli soldiers were killed or injured in the hours it took to suppress one Hezbollah fortification before moving on to the next one. Meanwhile, Hezbollah Katyushas—the immediate trigger for the land operation—continued to rain down on northern Israel, seemingly without pause.[35] When the UN-brokered cease-fire came into effect, the IDF was bogged down and taking heavy losses in Hezbollah's defensive system. It was an ignominious way for Israel to end a war.

AFTERMATH

The thirty-four-day war killed 119 Israeli soldiers and injured at least 600 more. Hezbollah rockets killed 43 Israeli civilians.[36] The 4,228 rockets fired into Israel during the war, of which 95 percent were Katyushas, shut down most of northern Israel throughout the war.[37] The estimated damage to Israel was between $3 billion and $5 billion.[38] The Lebanese side of the ledger showed higher losses—845 Lebanese killed, some 3,600 wounded, and at least half a million forced to flee their homes.[39] Anywhere up to 100,000

Lebanese residences were damaged or destroyed, and the cost to the national economy was in excess of $3 billion.[40] According to one eyewitness account, the wreckage of war was impossible to miss: “Power lines hung like entrails at a butcher shop. Shopkeepers’ stock littered the roads, and the roads themselves were as impassable as goat paths after a flood. In the south and the Dahiyeh [a Beirut suburb] those walls that still stood had been punctured to latticework by shrapnel. The rest of the country had paid dues for which it had never subscribed. Beirut, the north, the mountains—areas inimical to Hezbollah—saw their most modern bridges and highway overpasses bombed.”[41]

Hassan Nasrallah proclaimed “victory” by virtue of the fact that his army had survived thirty-four days of precision-guided munitions followed by an Israeli ground assault. But the damage to Lebanon’s economy could not be ignored, and “Nasrallah’s war,” however victorious he proclaimed it to be, could not disguise the anger that many Lebanese harbored for Hezbollah because of the devastation it had brought on them. Perhaps this explains why the Iranians rushed in with “bricks” of American dollars to pay off people who had lost loved ones and property in the war.[42]

Qassem Soleimani sent a Qods Force logistics expert and engineer, Hessam Khoshnevis (or Hassan Shateri, see chapter 8), to Lebanon as soon as the guns had fallen silent. His mission was to lead the Iranian effort to rebuild Lebanon’s war-damaged infrastructure as leader of the newly created Iranian Committee for the Reconstruction of Lebanon.[43] As was the case in other postconflict regions, like Iraq and later Syria, the Qods Force received additional assistance from Iranian parastatal entities like the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation and such nominally independent organizations as the Iranian Red Crescent Society.[44]

As Iranian covert operations against the coalition in Iraq from 2003 to 2011 demonstrated, the Qods Force was a “learning organization,” capable of adapting quickly to changes in its environment. At the end of the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war, the Qods Force conducted a lessons-learned analysis that identified tactics, techniques, and procedures that required changing or updating.[45] Undoubtedly, the Qods Force and Hezbollah analysts picked up the camouflage and concealment of larger rockets like the Fajrs as requiring immediate attention. On the plus side was that Hezbollah’s ability to

integrate advanced weapons (like tandem-warhead ATGMs) and to fire repeated salvoes of artillery rockets had been proven.

THE LESSONS FOR ISRAEL

As the war droned on without tangible success it became increasingly apparent to the IDF and its political leadership that Israel was fighting not just Hezbollah but Iran as well. As one postwar study put it, Hezbollah was a "well-equipped and resourced forward vanguard of Iran."[46] To put it another way, Iran effectively bordered on Israel, because of Hezbollah, but Israel did not border Iran. This asymmetry greatly limited Israel's chances of inflicting a retaliatory blow against its real enemy: the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Indeed, Iran was slowly and systematically tightening a noose around Israel's neck. Thanks to its alliance with Syria and Hezbollah to the north and its successful attempts at make closer its ties with Hamas in Gaza, Tehran would soon be able to synchronize a general assault against Israel from multiple points of the compass. Unfortunately for Qassem Soleimani and his bosses, an unexpected event, the Syrian civil war, was about to step all over Iranian plans and buy the Israelis badly needed breathing space.

21
The Odd Couple

Sayeda Zeinab bint Ali was not only the daughter of Ali, the first martyred Imam of Shia Islam, but a granddaughter of the Prophet Mohammed and sister of two other Shia imams, Hassan and Hussein. In fact, she was with Hussein in AD 680 when he was trapped and killed on the plains of Karbala by a rival claimant to the Islamic caliphate. Zeinab survived the cataclysm that took the lives of her brothers but was captured and taken back to Damascus. Zeinab spent much of the rest of her life there, specially revered by the Shia because she was a living witness to Hussein's martyrdom, an epochal event in Shia Islam.[1]

SAYEDA ZEINAB SHRINE

After Zeinab's death, she reportedly was buried in Damascus, and over the course of several centuries a tomb and pilgrimage complex were built up around her burial site. Typical of Shia shrines elsewhere (Najaf and Karbala, for example), her mausoleum was embellished with precious metals, and the number of pilgrims to it grew. One author would later describe her shrine in these words: "The ornately tiled Shi'ite shrine … contains an eight-foot high solid silver tomb, more than a dozen chrystal chandeliers, and two doors of solid gold."[2]

The Sayeda Zeinab Shrine, a hallowed, sanctified place as it was, by the early twenty-first century had been caught up in the Iranian government's manipulation of religious faith for state-sponsored terrorism. On one level, the shrine served as a useful location for Qods Force officers to discreetly observe pilgrims and identify potential recruits for plausibly deniable

terrorist attacks. For example, when the Qods Force and Lebanese Hezbollah needed Saudi nationals to carry out the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing, they found some among the pilgrims to Zeinab's shrine.[3]

But the shrine served Iranian purposes in other ways too. For example, Iran exploited the supposed threats to the complex posed by Sunni jihadists after 2011 to recruit Shia from around the world to defend it. Young men from Shia communities in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and others states rallied to the call to "defend Sayeda Zeinab"; many would die instead on battlefields far from the shrine, to keep a secular nationalist Arab regime in power.[4] Finally, as Syria's civil war ground on, Tehran increasingly invoked the "threatened shrine" as justification for the growing numbers of Iranian casualties in that war. In fact, for a few years Iranian officials emphatically denied the presence of any Iranian soldiers in Syria: the body bags and limbless men returning from Syria were "volunteers" who had been defending the shrine. By 2016 even this pretense had been dropped, although the Iranian authorities continued to invoke Zeinab's name as a reason for deploying combat forces to Syria.[5]

IRAN-SYRIA RELATIONS

One of Islamic Iran's most notable failures has been its inept regional diplomacy. Over the last forty years, Iran has managed to alienate nearly all of its neighbors at some point. Only a scant few state allies rallied to Iran over that history, and those usually for only short periods before mutual hostility resumed. Muammar Qadhafi's Libya is probably the best example of this pattern, although Mohammed al-Morsi's Egypt and Chadli Benjedid's Algeria might be added to the list as well.[6] Syria is the exception that proves the rule of frustrated Iranian diplomacy. Syria's de facto alliance with Iran dates back to 1979 and the earliest weeks of the Iranian revolution. Then, intelligence officers from Syria's multifarious intelligence community started training Iranian counterparts in SAVAMA and the IRGC.[7] When Saddam Hussein invaded Iran in 1980, Syrian president Hafez al-Asad broke with Arab unity and backed Iran. Syrian aid to Iran at this time extended beyond diplomatic support to include limited military cooperation and an active exchange of intelligence on Iraq and Israel.[8]

When Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, Tehran used its new alliance with Syria to open up the Revolutionary Guards' logistics base at Zabadani (see, especially, chapter 5). The Iranians offered IRGC soldiers to help defend Syria from a possible Israeli attack; fearing an Israeli response, Hafez al-Asad politely declined. In any case, the Islamic Republic used discounted oil shipments to keep Damascus on its side against Iraq. For his part, Asad sold at least some of this oil on the international market, earning a nice profit.[9]

The Iranian embassy in Damascus was a powerful hub of Tehran's covert-action programs throughout the Levant. All of this was done with the knowledge and consent of the Syrian security services, which otherwise maintained a tight grip on foreign activities inside the country. The Iranian ambassador, Ali Akbar Mohtashemi-Pur, was a cleric with considerable influence over policy toward Syria, Lebanon, and Israel.[10] As Israeli historian Ronen Bergman has documented, Mohtashemi-Pur's "influence exceeded that of any other Iranian ambassador with a covert-action budget of tens of millions of dollars a month."[11]

FRICTION

The Iranian-Syrian alliance was never one of equals, and the two sides were certainly not natural partners in the conventional sense. At times disagreements over Hezbollah in particular threatened to overwhelm the core security interests that otherwise drew them together. In the beginning, the Syrian government was suspicious of Iran's Hezbollah program, viewing it as a potential threat to its own paramountcy over Lebanon.[12] In fact, at one point in Lebanon's seemingly interminable civil war, Iran and Syria were backing mutually hostile Shia factions.[13] Eventually, though, the Syrians came around to appreciating the value of Hezbollah as a lever against the Israelis; they aided and abetted the steady buildup of Hezbollah's military arm throughout the 1990s and beyond. Syria became an essential transshipment point for Iranian arms flights: the arms landed at Damascus International Airport and from there were taken overland to the Bekaa Valley for onward delivery to Hezbollah.[14]

For Tehran, Hezbollah served a number of useful purposes. First, it tied down a substantial number of Israeli forces that might otherwise have been

used against Iran and its allies in other theaters. Second, Hezbollah's global terrorism arm, Islamic Jihad, constrained Israeli military and covertaction options, because there was always the possibility of Hezbollah retaliation against an Israeli embassy in South America or Israeli tourists in Eastern Europe. Finally, Iran used Hezbollah's growing contacts with Palestinian rejectionist groups to stymie the Arab-Israeli peace process.[15]

The Syrian government's approach to Hezbollah was bound by a different set of considerations. Damascus used Hezbollah for leverage over Israel as well, but mainly to force the Israelis to negotiate the return of the Golan Heights. The latter was a particularly valuable piece of regional real estate that had been occupied by Israel in 1967, annexed in 1981, and occasionally made the object of a possible Israeli-Syrian peace deal. Syria, in other words, was open to a settlement with Israel, whereas the Iranian hard-liners, who drove policy on the Levant, were not.[16]

Ever the deliberate and calculating strategist, al-Asad imposed certain red lines on the tripartite Iran-Syria-Hezbollah relationship; he did not want to do anything that might trigger Israeli retaliation against Syria proper.[17] In practice, this meant that the Golan Heights was, paradoxically, Israel's quietest border from 1974 to 2011. In Asad's calculations, the Syrian-Israeli conflict could be fought, in fact *must* be fought, but only on Lebanese soil and generally using local proxies.[18]

For the first two decades of the Iran-Syria alliance it was usually Damascus that dictated the pace of bilateral relations. In the late 1990s, when the U.S. government was on the verge of mediating an Israeli-Syrian peace settlement that would have disarmed Hezbollah, Tehran was understandably worried. Should peace be achieved, Iran would not only lose a valuable Arab state ally but also its means of resupplying Hezbollah using Syrian territory. As long as the peace talks were under way and showed signs of progress, the Syrian government throttled back Iranian arms deliveries to Hezbollah via Syria.[19] Fortunately for Tehran, the talks failed, and Damascus once again joined the "resistance front" against Israel.

Hafez al-Asad's diplomatic acumen was based on a sound understanding of what a relatively weak and isolated power like Syria could achieve in regional politics.[20] When he died in 2000, the mantle of power automatically went to his son Bashar, who proved less capable of keeping Iranian and Hezbollah influence at bay.

DEEPER TIES

One predictable consequence of the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq was that Iran and Syria were driven closer together. Both viewed the occupation of Iraq as the first step in a larger American scheme to impose its will on the Middle East. Both feared becoming the next American target if Washington achieved its goals for Iraq. Both believed that the covert backing of Iraqi and other insurgents was the most viable way of tying down U.S. forces in Iraq. Damascus and Tehran backed rival groups in Iraq but did not let the fact get in the way of their strategic partnership, particularly as it pertained to the United States.

After 2003 Qassem Soleimani traveled frequently to Damascus, where he met leaders of the Syrian Mukhabarat (intelligence and security), such as Asef Shawkat (the president's brother-in-law), Mohammed Suleiman, and Mohammed Nasif Kheirbek.[21] There were several areas for collaboration, including sustaining Palestinian rejectionists for the ongoing war against Israel. Tehran had the money, weapons, and trainers, and Damascus could provide the essential haven for groups like PIJ, Hamas, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine–General Command.[22] Syria lay at the heart of multiple regional conflicts; as one author memorably put it, "Damascus is essentially the bar scene from 'Star Wars' for terrorists in the Middle East, providing a locale where Iranian allies such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad can coordinate unperturbed."[23]

Other regional events further solidified the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah axis. The 14 February 2005 assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri of Lebanon triggered an outpouring of public anger and frustration so vast that it compelled the phased withdrawal of the Syrian army from Lebanon.[24] But the blowback from the Hariri assassination didn't stop there: an international inquiry was launched, and intrepid United Nations investigators began probing into especially sensitive areas like the linkages between Syrian government officials, Hezbollah, and the assassins.[25] In November 2005, as international heat on Syria was turned up over Lebanon, Bashar al-Asad concluded a new joint strategic-defense agreement with Iran. Under it, the Iranians built four signals-intelligence sites in Syria, paving the way for joint SIGINT operations against Israel, Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and coalition forces in Iraq.[26]

Then came the July–August 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah war. Merely having survived thirty-four days of Israeli air strikes followed by a ground offensive was grounds for Hezbollah to declare victory. Nasrallah's postconflict heroic status impressed Bashar al-Asad, who wanted to share in the glory of "defeating Israel." As an Asad associate, Manaf Tlass, put it later on, Iran and Hezbollah "kept telling Bashar how great he was and how he was becoming leader of the axis of resistance; they knew how to charm him and inflate his ego."[27]

Three years later, in December 2009, Tehran and Damascus concluded a defense memorandum of understanding that established a Joint Defense Cooperation Committee, as well as new understandings on Hamas and Israel. In addition, the Iranians asked the Syrians to reduce their ties to Iraqi Baathists and jihadists, who were destabilizing an Iraqi government already under considerable Iranian influence.[28]

THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

In December 2010, a Tunisian fruit vendor named Tarek El-Tayeb Mohammed Bouazizi set himself on fire in a dramatic protest against the corruption and nepotism of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and his family. The uploaded video of this self-immolation went viral and soon sparked a wave of demonstrations in Libya, Egypt, Bahrain, Jordan, and Morocco—the Arab Spring. In Syria, Bashar al-Asad unwisely predicted that the movement would not affect his country, because Syrians were loyal to the ruling system.

Bashar should have known better, or at least his intelligence community should have warned him about what was coming. After decades of Baath Party rule, Syria was a tinderbox waiting to explode. In addition to an anemic, chronically underperforming economy, there was high unemployment, especially among the young, as well as widespread anger at government corruption. Layered on top of this was a lethal sectarian divide pitting a disempowered Sunni Muslim majority against a government dominated by religious minorities. Finally, there was Bashar al-Asad's cynical pact with Sunni jihadists intent on fighting the Americans in Iraq. After the United States pulled out of Iraq in 2011, many of these same jihadis saw a ripe new target in the embattled Syrian government.

The Syrian civil war was probably sparked by a single, publicized instance of regime cruelty in the southern city of Daraa. A group of teenage boys, inspired by Al Jazeera coverage of antigovernment protests in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, spray-painted anti-Asad slogans on the walls of their school. The notorious Mukhabarat arrested the kids and then filmed them under torture. Somehow these videos entered the public domain, and the outrage of the general population spilled into the streets. Virtually the entire Sunni heartland of Homs, Hama, Idlib, and eventually Aleppo went into open revolt against Asad's Baathist regime. More alarmingly yet for the Syrian government, the old methods of repression, including military force, did not deter angry Syrians from joining what became enormous antigovernment demonstrations.

The Arab Spring caught Tehran by surprise much as it did everyone else. At first, when it seemed as if the the protests would be largely confined to pro–United States nations like Egypt, Tunisia, and Bahrain, the Iranian government was exultant, predicting that the pro-Western regimes would be swept away. When the Arab Spring flooded into Syria, though, Iranian braggadocio rapidly shifted to expressions of concern and paranoia about "CIA plots." After all, Syria, as we have seen, was Iran's only Arab ally: if Tehran lost Damascus to the rebels, its carefully constructed position in the Levant might be irrevocably destroyed.[29]

Syria was in fact a vital cornerstone of Iran's regional ambitions. It afforded Tehran access to Hezbollah in Lebanon and the coastline of the eastern Mediterranean. It was thanks to Syria and its constant attempts to manipulate the various Palestinian factions on its soil and in Lebanon that Iran had a window into that world as well. Finally, Syria's location at the heart of the Middle East gave Tehran leverage over Israel, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. It enabled Iran to spoil any Middle East peace process that excluded it. In comments that were later retracted, one former Revolutionary Guards officer and head of an influential Tehran think tank wrote that "Syria is the 35th province [of Iran] and a strategic province for us."[30]

QODS FORCE TO THE RESCUE

The U.S. Army's Special Forces call it "foreign internal defense," or FID. In essence, FID is based on the principle that helping others help themselves reduces the need for large U.S. forces to intervene in local wars.[31] In theory, FID also fits the Qods Force mission profile, but in the Middle East that unit tended to be more proficient at *instigating* insurgency than combating it. Until Syria, that is: when that country experienced mass civil disobedience in 2011, the Qods Force found itself dragged into the Syrian morass, fighting Syrian rebels on behalf of Bashar al-Asad. Nine years later, the Syrian civil war had killed more Qods Force operatives than any other conflict, bar none.[32]

Within weeks of the unrest in Daraa and other Sunni cities, Qassem Soleimani flew to Damascus and met with Syrian security officials and probably Bashar al-Asad as well. After touring the different fronts, Soleimani offered advisory assistance and financial credit to help sustain the demoralized Syrian government. He also appointed Brigadier Hossein Hamadani as his personal envoy to Damascus. Significantly, Hamadani was the senior IRGC commander for the Tehran area and as such had been responsible for the suppression of the 2009 demonstrations that had nearly toppled the Iranian government. Altogether, from an Iranian state-interests perspective, he was the ideal figure to provide on-site advice to Bashar and his commanders.[33]

When Syria's internal wars worsened in 2012 and 2013, the power balance between Damascus and Tehran shifted in favor of the latter. In an interesting reversal of the 1980s, Syrian intelligence and military officers now went to Tehran for training by Iranian counterparts on cyberwar, signals-intelligence collection and analysis, and Internet monitoring. These skills would later enable the Mukhabarat to infiltrate and manipulate the fractious Syrian opposition and help turn the tide of the civil war in Bashar's favor.[34]

In addition to Brigadier Hamadani, Qassem Soleimani also leaned heavily on a dependable subordinate named Mohsen Chizari, who headed the Qods Force department responsible for operations and training. Chizari (recall from chapter 14) had been briefly detained by U.S. forces in Iraq in 2006 before being released into Iraqi custody and then transferred to Iran. Now he was arranging the training of Syrian security officers in Iran and supervising the deployment of Qods Force advisers to Syria.[35] He also had

the task of coordinating the Iranian response with other major stakeholders in Tehran. The Basij, a volunteer militia closely linked to the IRGC command structure and consistently involved in internal security missions, began helping to train progovernment militias in Syria, while the IRGC ground forces eventually aided their Syrian counterparts in the use of heavy equipment, such as tanks and artillery. The Law Enforcement Forces, a kind of Iranian gendarmerie, had valuable expertise in crowd control gained from grappling with the mass Tehran demonstrations of 2009. Finally, both the IRGC Intelligence Directorate and the Intelligence Ministry stepped forward to aid the Syrians in counterintelligence, signals intelligence, and the handling of human sources.[36]

At first Qods Force advisers were embedded in the Syrian Defense Ministry and General Headquarters, where they provided guidance at the strategic and operational levels of the war. They also identified Syrian security-force requirements in weaponry, communications, intelligence, logistics, militia formation, and the disruption of enemy communications.[37] A daily air bridge from Iran via Iraq and Turkey using airlines like Mahan Air, Yas Air, and Iran Air carried the steady flow of materiel and personnel to Syria.[38] When the U.S. government protested to Iraq about the nature of these flights, the IRGC added more denial-and-deception measures to disguise the shipments. Often the weapons were listed as food or medicine, while IRGC personnel were carried on passenger manifests as pilgrims or religious students. When Damascus International Airport was deemed too vulnerable from a security standpoint, the Iranians switched their flights to the Syrian cities of Latakia and Tartous.[39]

SYRIAN MILITIAS

As the revolt spread throughout the Sunni heartland in 2011 and 2012, the Syrian army began to disintegrate. It was largely a conscript army anyway; it was no surprise that Sunni recruits refused to fire on their unarmed countrymen and coreligionists. Consequently, the Syrian government increasingly relied on regime-friendly units that had a heavy leavening of Alawite officers (members of a group dating back to the ninth or tenth century “accepted” in the late twentieth century as Muslims and of the Shia branch of the faith) or members of other religious minorities. Still, even

these units, like the Republican Guard and the 4th Armored Division, lacked the manpower to restore government control over rebellious regions. One response to this deficiency was to create militias.

The Qods Force and Lebanese Hezbollah proved especially useful to Damascus in raising and training proregime militias. The Syrian Jaish al-Shaabi (Popular Army), modeled on the Iranian Basij, was intended for neighborhood security to release regular army units to rebel-controlled areas.[40] A Qods Force brigadier, Hassan Shateri (Hassem Khushnevis), highlighted this new internationalist role for the Basij, which hitherto had been largely restricted to domestic security duties inside Iran: "[The Basij] is the most important achievement of the Islamic Revolution, not limited to the geography of Islamic Iran; outside of Iran it is a holy symbol of salvation of the oppressed. Today the Basij is in a state of globalization, and it is a global Islamic Basij that will resolve the problems of the oppressed."[41]

In addition to the Jaish al-Shaabi, the Syrian government and its Iranian advisers created militias like the National Defense Force (NDF). Manned by Alawites and other religious minorities, these groups rapidly became notorious for human rights abuses in the areas that they occupied. At this point in the war, the besieged Asad regime saw no advantage in a "hearts and minds" counterinsurgency strategy. Fear was the valued currency of the moment: raw, abject, unadulterated terror inflicted by the government on its own citizens.

As the Syrian war broadened in 2012–13 to include most of the country, Asad's need for fighting forces rapidly outstripped the available supply. More Qods Force and Basij teams deployed to Syria with the task of training Alawite, Christian, Druze (a sect neither Christian nor Muslim), and Ismaili militiamen. Moreover, by mid-2012 Qods Force advisers were embedded in Syrian units down to the battalion level, although this practice rapidly depleted the scarce supplies of well-trained men that distinguished the Qods Force from other Iranian units. In essence, the Syrian civil war was bleeding out Iran's premier covert-action force.[42]

STAVING OFF DEFEAT

Syrian troops did most of the fighting and dying, but it is safe to say that Iran was instrumental to Bashar al-Asad's survival in the early years of the Syrian war. As we have seen, the Qods Force was the tip of the Iranian spear in Syria. Qassem Soleimani, just as he would in Iraq in 2014–15, played an outsized role in Syria. He not only helped restructure the Syrian regime's defenses at a critical juncture but facilitated the flow of arms from Iran to Syria and directed the training of new Syrian security units. Later, when Asad and his generals had bought themselves some breathing room, Soleimani helped the Syrians plan offensives against rebel enclaves and coordinated assistance from Russia and Iraq.

In May 2012, when the outcome of the Syrian crisis hung in the balance, the deputy commander of the Qods Force (and Soleimani's heir), Ismail Qaani, stated that if the Qods Force had not intervened when it did, the Syrian government "would have already been overthrown."[43] Giving some allowance for hyperbole, Qaani wasn't far off the mark. By the end of 2013, Iran's biggest accomplishment was helping Bashar al-Asad stave off defeat. But there was still a war to wage, and it would be years before a winner and a loser could be determined.

22

A Qods Force Tragedy

Until the Syrian civil war, relatively little was publicly known about the Qods Force order of battle, internal organization, recruiting system, and training regimen. While it was true that its commander had become something of a celebrity in the Middle East, thanks in part to his own publicity mill, we knew very little about rank-and-file Qods Force fighters. What were their hopes, dreams, and frustrations? How did they respond to the stresses of combat, the deaths of comrades, and frequent deployments away from their families and loved ones? The Iranian government continued to insist for years that no Iranian soldiers were fighting in Syria, only "volunteers," whose deaths as "martyrs" occasionally surfaced in the media.[1] Consequently, analysts had little data by which to understand how the Qods Force operated at the tactical level, where operators trained foreign armies, militias, insurgents, and terrorists.

IRAN'S SECRET ARMY

In September 2013, some answers to these questions emerged from a rather unlikely source: a Syrian rebel group, Liwa al-Dawood. On 19 August a firefight took place south of Aleppo, Syria, that pitted a small cadre of Qods Force advisers and Syrian militiamen against a much larger and better equipped rebel force. The Qods Force and its allies suffered a tactical defeat; several Iranians were cut off in a cornfield and killed. The victorious rebels discovered a handheld video camera on one of the dead Iranians. Liwa al-Dawood stamped its own logo on the captured footage and sent

copies to several international news outlets, including the British Broadcasting Corporation and the Dutch Nieuwsuur.[2]

The video was unedited, but it did contain vignettes of several days in the life of a Qods Force unit that was advising the Syrian army and aiding in the creation of the National Defense Force (see chapter 21). Two European news organizations, Nieuwsuur and the BBC, received segments of this footage. In November 2013 the BBC aired a documentary, *Iran's Secret Army*, assembled from this footage. To date, this documentary is our best glimpse of a Qods Force tactical unit in the field. It not only shows how the Qods Force trains foreign militias but reveals Qods Force attitudes toward the Syrian populace, Bashar al-Asad's army, and the broader context of the Syrian civil war.

THE CAMERAMAN

One inadvertent star of the BBC documentary was the thirty-year-old cameraman from Tehran, Hadi Baghbani. The footage tells us very little about him; he may have been in the Revolutionary Guards or its Basij militia. Why Baghbani was shooting the video is also unclear. Perhaps the video was intended for training or internal propaganda purposes. It certainly was not for public distribution, since it focused on Iranian military advisers in Syria at a time when Tehran officially denied they were there. It also provides an unvarnished perspective on the destructiveness of the Syrian army, which only added fuel to the raging inferno of the civil war.

The video begins with Hadi Baghbani's arrival at Damascus International Airport, where he boards a Syrian Mi-8 Hip helicopter bound for Aleppo. There Baghbani is driven to a Qods Force headquarters facility inside a Syrian military compound. The headquarters has dormitories, a prayer hall, and a communications room, where contact is maintained with the Qods Force advisory teams. But this is not Hadi Baghbani's final destination in Syria; the subject of his filmmaking project was a tactical Qods Force team in the field.

ISMAIL HEIDARI

The other star of the video now makes his appearance: Ismail Taqi Heidari, a thirty-three-year-old Qods Force operative from Amol, a city in northern Iran. At different points in the footage, Heidari demonstrates familiarity with Modern Standard Arabic, which may account for the absence of a translator in the field. One of his ID cards was later captured by the rebels. Issued by the Syrian General Intelligence Department, it entitled Heidari to bear arms in Syria. It is Heidari who takes Hadi Baghbani to his safe house, located in an abandoned school in southern Aleppo.[3]

Ismail Heidari doesn't reveal much about himself or the small team under his command. He notes at one point that he had done six tours of duty in Syria over the last eighteen months, which suggests the Qods Force rotated its people in and out of the country frequently. While beneficial from a morale standpoint, such a deployment cycle would not help a Qods Force combatant build long-term ties with Syrian counterparts.

Heidari does offer his opinions on the Syrian war, Bashar al-Asad's army, and the Qods Force campaign to win the hearts and minds of Syrian civilians. Although not authoritative, his opinions are candid, without the usual finishing touches of government censors, security experts, or public-relations men. Unlike Qassem Soleimani or Ismail Qaani, who frequently and reliably delivered the government line on social media or in conservative media outlets, Heidari offers the perspective of a relatively low-ranking functionary in Iran's top covert-action agency.

In Heidari's opinion, the Syrian war is not a civil war but a conflict between "Islam and infidels," a struggle of "good against evil." The "good" side, he emphasizes (referring to foreigners like himself supporting the government, no Russians yet being present), is backed by Iran's Supreme Leader and Hezbollah's General Secretary Hassan Nasrallah. It consists of Iranians, Hezbollah, Afghans, and Iraqis. The "evil" forces in Syria include a laundry list of Iranian enemies and rivals, among them Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. Heidari's worldview appears to be essentially Manichean: everything is black or white—there is no gray, nothing "in between." In this sense, Heidari's ideas are not terribly original. In fact, they follow fairly closely the party line put out by the IRGC leadership on a regular basis.[4]

It is when he talks about the Syrian army that Heidari's opinions become interesting, since he clearly has firsthand knowledge of his subject. In parts of the video aired by the Dutch Nieuwsuur, Heidari warmly greets the local Syrian army commander but back at the safe house is quite critical of the Syrian army's leadership. His central concern is that the officers do not treat their soldiers with respect, as was true, he says, of the Iranian army under the shah. Heidari is quite sympathetic toward the Syrian soldiers, stressing that "they've been insulted and humiliated" and praising them for their "patience." But then he jokes that the Syrian soldier needs only two things to fight: tea and cigarettes. "If you're nice to them," Heidari continues, "they're nice to you.Unfortunately, their army has a system where they're forced to work."[5]

HEARTS AND MINDS

Like every good counterinsurgent, Heidari pays lip service to the "hearts and minds" credo. The BBC documentary shows Heidari and his men stopping their Toyota trucks to hand out candy to local children, one of whom has the very Sunni-appropriate name Umar. "We say hello to people," Heidari says, adding that "people trust us because of the way we behave." He contrasts the Iranian approach toward civilians with that of the Syrian army: "The Syrian army, when they're in their vehicles, they drive fast through the streets with no respect for their own people. But when we drive through the same areas, we'll drive slowly, especially if the road isn't tarmac and our driving could whip up dust clouds."[6]

Heidari emphasizes that the Syrian government's treatment of its own populace has to change, especially by the army. "We need to continue with these guys until this culture has changed," he adds. Still, as one instance recorded on Hadi Baghbani's camera indicates, the Iranians would have done well to heed their own advice. During one drive through an Aleppo suburb Ismail Heidari informs the cameraman that "there were no humans" in the area when the Iranians first arrived. Another Qods Force team member interjects, "There still aren't any humans—only Arabs!" One suspects that arrogance like this is conveyed to the unit's Syrian trainees in ways both subtle and otherwise.

In addition to “doing hearts and minds” among the Syrians whom they seek to influence, Ismail Heidari’s Qods Force unit was also training the pro–Syrian government NDF. Hadi Baghbani’s footage shows Qods Force members training militia on mortars and a self-propelled, Russian-built 155-mm artillery piece. As one NDF man clowns atop the “SP,” an Iranian voice is heard to shout, “Get your head down. You’ll get it blown off if you stand up there!”[7] In a separate interview, Heidari informs Baghbani that some of the NDF had been trained in Iran (at camps presumably run by the Qods Force). Those NDF with experience in Iran, he adds, “are comfortable working with us and they know our ways.”[8]

The primary mission of the Qods Force in Syria is to train and advise the government security forces and allies. But Heidari also reveals that the Qods Force engages in battlefield reconnaissance, identifies rebel positions for targeting by Syrian artillery or assaults by Syrian infantry—and, on occasion, leads those attacks. It is in this more hands-on combat role that the Qods Force has suffered its greatest casualties.

MARTYRS

In the last segment of Hadi Baghbani’s video is unexpected footage of a Qods Force–led mission gone awry. On 19 August 2013, Ismail Heidari is instructed to mobilize his men and stop a rebel advance on an important Syrian government position south of Aleppo. About forty NDF men and their Qods Force advisers converge at a government base at a disused poultry farm on an elevation. Heidari’s biggest problem is that he does not know the size or composition of the rebel force heading toward him. It is clear at this point that the local Qods Force commander would have benefited from some close air support, whether strike aircraft, helicopters, or drones.

Ismail Heidari tries to ascertain his enemy’s strength through the scope of his Dragunov sniper rifle, and what he sees makes apparent the liabilities of his lightly armed and unsupported unit. Advancing against them is a much larger Syrian rebel force that is backed by at least one T-72 tank and an infantry fighting vehicle, both probably captured from government arsenals. Baffled, Ismail Heidari strings his men out along a road and orders a movement to contact. Hadi Baghbani, with an AK-47 in one hand and his

camera in the other, accompanies Heidari into the cornfield in their front. Rifle shots ring out, then machine-gun and heavier fire as well. Heidari's men quickly run out of ammunition and find themselves at risk of being outflanked. His second in command, Yahya, orders a retreat, and Hadi Baghbani's camera stops.

We don't know what happened next—whether or not the larger government force presumably at the poultry farm was able to block the rebel advance or was forced to yield the high ground. Only two days later, though—as we know from separate, additional footage added by BBC—Ismail Taqi Heidari is buried with military honors in his hometown, Amol. The unlucky cameraman Hadi Baghbani too is returned to his family in a coffin—two more victims of his country's expanding war in Syria.

Hadi Baghbani's video record directly contradicted the official line propagated by the Iranian government that there were no Iranian soldiers fighting in Syria. For the purposes of this book, it offers a rare, tactical-level perspective on a small Qods Force unit at war. There do not appear to be in that unit any of the rank-consciousness that afflicts many regular army units. Ismail Heidari leads evening prayers, as may be appropriate given his age, and his men seem to be a close-knit group who train, pray, and fight together. As befits their mission, they are based in a small, abandoned school in their area of operations and travel around in white, nondescript Toyota trucks.

Much of this book is focused on the operational and strategic levels of war. We learn about Qassem Soleimani and a few of his most senior lieutenants as they carry out a national strategy of extending Iranian influence in the Middle East while seeking to sap the strength to resist of the United States and Israel. This chapter, instead, is a snapshot of how that strategy was implemented by a Qods Force tactical unit on the front lines of Asad's war in Syria.

23

Coalition Warfare

As early as 2012, scarcely a year into the Syrian civil war, it was clear that the conflict was going to take years to resolve. For Syrian president Bashar al-Asad, the primary objective was survival, and this singular focus tended to be the greatest asset on the government's side. That being said, there were formidable obstacles ahead for Damascus: the dictator was reviled not only by a majority of his own people but throughout the Arab region as well. On the numerous battlefronts, government military leadership was woefully inadequate. In the boiling cauldron of Syria's sectarian politics, many of the army's predominantly Sunni conscripts defected to the rebels rather than fight their own people. This meant that lack of manpower was, after poor morale, the Syrian army's single greatest liability.

REVERSING THE TIDE

As Syria's most important foreign ally, Iran inherited these debilities and struggled to find a way of overcoming them. Tehran's early objectives in Syria were maintaining lines of communication to Hezbollah in Lebanon and keeping the Syrian regime in power. At first, the Iranians adopted a minimalist approach. Qassem Soleimani was dispatched to Damascus on several occasions, and Qods Force advisory teams staffed the Syrian high command as well as tactical units. Perhaps more importantly for Asad's survival, Iran opened credit lines that helped Damascus pay its fighting forces and equip them with new weapons purchased from Moscow.[1]

But Qods Force advisers and Russian arms were not enough to stave off a rebel victory. The Syrian army's losses mounted throughout 2012, from

both casualties and defections. Although the resistance was hampered by political disunity, its ranks were swelling with new fighters, and it was receiving aid from Turkey and the Gulf Arab monarchies. By the end of 2012, it seemed as if Bashar al-Asad's days were numbered.[2]

Qassem Soleimani doubled down on his initial investment in Asad's survival by assigning more Qods Force advisers to the Syrian military. Soleimani and his aides persuaded the Syrian leadership to augment its remaining regime-protection forces with new militias, and throughout 2013 and 2014 Qods Force teams helped train Syrian militias like the National Defense Force, the Shabiha, and the Jaish al-Shaabi. These paramilitaries drew from the Syrian religious minorities that feared a Sunni rebel victory: the Alawites, Ismailis (a Shiite subsect), Christians, and Druze.[3]

SOLEIMANI'S COALITION

The exigencies of the Syrian conflict, especially its persistent demand for more fighters, propelled Qassem Soleimani into a new role as coalition builder. With the resources of the Iranian state at his disposal, he began assembling an unlikely alliance of Syrian government soldiers and militias, Revolutionary Guards and regular Iranian army soldiers, seasoned Hezbollah combatants, Iraqi Shia militias, Afghans, Pakistanis, and eventually Russians.

Iran moved quickly to reassure its Syrian friends. Soleimani and his lieutenants met routinely not only with the Syrian security chiefs but with Bashar al-Asad and his brother, Maher, as well. "We're not like the Americans," Soleimani reportedly assured the Syrians. "We don't abandon our friends."[4] One manifestation of the newly enhanced Syrian-Iranian alliance was the creation of a joint headquarters in Damascus, where the Qods Force coordinated strategy with the Syrians and the other allies it had corralled into Asad's defense.[5]

An additional obstacle for Soleimani was building consensus for his Syria policy in the notoriously fractious Iranian government. The Qods Force commander quickly learned that if he was going to salvage Asad's crumbling regime, he would need troops from all the Iranian security services. The first he turned to was the Revolutionary Guards, his parent organization, which responded with experts on armor, artillery, intelligence,

and communications. In addition, the IRGC's Basij reserve sent specialists in crowd control and militia organization. By 2016, elite Revolutionary Guards commando units called *Saberin* had deployed to the Syrian battlefield as well.[6] Eventually, Soleimani recruited experts from regular Iranian army, Intelligence Ministry, and law-enforcement forces.[7] This was a considerable achievement for an IRGC major general—in fact, it could not have been carried out without direct support from Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

LEBANESE HEZBOLLAH

We have seen in earlier chapters how Hezbollah became a vital player in Tehran's projection of power. It not only tied down Israel's formidable military by threatening northern Israel but possessed a global terrorist arm that, at times, functioned as an appendage of the Qods Force itself. Hezbollah was equally useful to Syria, insomuch as it gave Damascus some leverage over Israel when it came to negotiating the status of the Israelioccupied Golan Heights.

When the Arab Spring spread to Syria, Hezbollah's prerogatives were threatened too. Although Hezbollah had cultivated close ties with a number of Sunni jihadist groups, it viewed the prospect of a rebel victory in Damascus with considerable alarm. Given Hezbollah's close ties to Asad, a new Syrian regime might be inclined to cut its Iranian lifeline across Syrian territory. As the head of Israeli Military Intelligence put it in a public speech, "The damages of the imminent fall of Syria are very high for both Iran and Hezbollah. Iran is losing a sole ally in the region surrounding Israel. It will lose the ability to transfer weaponry through Syria to Hezbollah. Iran and Hezbollah are both doing all in their power to assist Asad's regime."[8]

Both the Qods Force and Damascus pressured Hezbollah to commit its battle-hardened veterans to the Syrian fight. They clearly understood Hezbollah's value as a force enhancer for the beleaguered Syrian security forces, especially in sniping and directing artillery fire.[9] According to a 2017 report in the *Wall Street Journal*, the discipline of Hezbollah units clearly overshadowed that of their often brutally inept Syrian allies: "In Syrian villages retaken from rebel control, Hezbollah fighters have been

seen holding Syrian soldiers by the wrist or collar and forcing them to return appliances or furniture looted from homes."[10]

Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah was nonetheless reluctant to commit large numbers of his men to Syria, even taking the strategic implications of a Syrian government defeat into account. First, Nasrallah had to keep an eye on Israel, which keenly understood what a diminished Hezbollah presence in southern Lebanon meant for its own security. Moreover, Nasrallah, no doubt pleased by his soaring support in the Arab world after he proclaimed victory over Israel in the 2006 war, knew that aiding the despised Syrian dictator would harm his reputation. Then there were domestic political considerations in Lebanon, where Hezbollah's close ties to Iran and Syria were deeply unpopular. In the end, Ali Khamenei reportedly had to convince Nasrallah personally to commit his army to Bashar al-Asad's survival.[11]

Hezbollah began with a page out of the Qods Force handbook, supplying small teams of advisers to aid the Qods Force in training and equipping Syrian army units and militias. When queried about Hezbollah's presence in Syria, the organization's spokesmen either denied it or coyly refused to provide details.[12] Yet even this commitment was not enough, and the Iranians and Syrians offered inducements to Hezbollah in the form of advanced weaponry. As a result, Hezbollah now operates a formidable arsenal that includes SA-17 Grizzly and SA-22 Greyhound surface-to-air missiles, SS-N-26 Strobile antiship cruise missiles, AT-14 Kornet antitank guided missiles, Fateh 110 ballistic missiles, and T-72 tanks.[13]

In a 30 April 2013 speech, Hassan Nasrallah tried justifying his decision to send forces to Syria: Hezbollah had to fight for Syria because the survival of the Shia as a whole was at stake.[14] But an unnamed Reuters source put it more bluntly: "Nasrallah is not going to say 'No' to someone who has given him $30 billion over the past 30 years."[15] In any case, Hezbollah's numbers in Syria increased in the summer of 2013.[16] Its first priority was protecting lines of communication that ran from the Damascus International and Latakia airports, where Iranian cargo planes routinely landed, to Lebanon. Hezbollah snipers helped Syrian government forces recapture Zabadani, an IRGC logistics hub since the early 1980s.[17] Hezbollah veterans were also involved in the seizure of Qusayr, which governed access to the northern Bekaa. Several press reports indicated that

Qassem Soleimani personally supervised these operations and that Qods Force operatives fought alongside Hezbollah on the ground.[18]

By the end of 2013, the total number of Hezbollah combatants in Syria at any given time probably exceeded two thousand. But their relatively small numbers did not reflect their impact on the battlefield.[19] As the *Wall Street Journal* put it, "The resulting Hezbollah surge to bolster Mr. Assad represented a turning point in the Syrian conflict, giving the Syrian leader enough strength to survive, though not enough to prevail."[20] At least not yet.

Nonetheless, the Syrian conflict represented a considerable drain on Lebanese Hezbollah's resources. This was not the war that Hassan Nasrallah wanted to fight: there would be no kudos from the Arab street for helping Bashar al-Asad butcher his own people. But Nasrallah didn't really have much choice; he understood that the loss of his old patron in Damascus could imperil his movement as nothing else could. Still, by 2020 Hezbollah was grappling with the loss of several senior commanders, more than two thousand dead combatants, and perhaps six thousand wounded.[21] These casualties represented a considerable strain on a force that prided itself on quality and combat experience over quantity.

IRAQI MILITIA ALLIES

One measure of the stakes involved in Syria was the number of combatants lined up on both sides. The Syrian government had the remnants of the pre-2011 army, sectarian militias, the Iranians, and Hezbollah. But these were not enough, so Qassem Soleimani recruited more allies for Bashar al-Asad among the powerful Iraqi Shia militias. Many of these were well known to the U.S. government, having been directly responsible for the deaths of hundreds of coalition personnel from 2003 onward. Among those answering Soleimani's calls for support were Kataib Hezbollah (led by Soleimani's old friend Abu Mahdi al-Mohandis), Asaib Ahl al-Haq (responsible for the 2007 attack on American soldiers in Karbala), the Badr Organization, Seyed al-Shuhada, and more recent Qods Force creations like Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba.

Just as it was doing with its own "volunteers," Tehran used a Salafist threat to the Seyeda Zeinab Shrine in Damascus to justify using Iraqi Shia

militias in Syria.[22] As one Iraqi veteran of Syria's civil war put it, "We are defending our religion. It's in our blood. It is a religious duty that we not keep silent when we see the Shiite holy shrines being attacked."[23] The Iraqi Shia militias were collected to form the Abu Fadl al-Abbas Brigade when they arrived in Syria in 2012. The unit was nominally led by Alawite officers, to give a veneer of Syrian ownership, although one suspects there was considerable friction between Syrians and Iraqis, not to mention among the Iraqis themselves.[24]

When the legions of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) erupted into northern Iraq in 2014 and captured Mosul that June, many Iraqis fighting in Syria were sent back home to form the core of the hastily assembled Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Masses). There they would help prevent the fall of Baghdad to ISIS later that summer.[25] Still, when Syrian conditions demanded yet more fighters, Soleimani would use his personal relationships with the Iraqi leaders to reassign some militia fighters to the Syrian fight. Such was the case during the 2015 effort to recapture Aleppo, which involved some one thousand combatants from Kataib Hezbollah and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba.[26] According to one Iraqi militia leader, the Qods Force commander tried to inspire the Iraqis with the slogan that the "road to liberate Mosul is through Aleppo."[27]

But it would take more than defending shrines or sloganeering to convince Iraqi Shia to fight in Syria rather than defend their homes and families in Iraq. The simple fact was that a Kataib Hezbollah fighter earned more money fighting the Islamic State in Syria than he would in Iraq, and this money was coming from the Iranian treasury. One fighter put it this way to the *Guardian*: "If you are accepted, you will be taken to Iran for around two weeks of training and then you will be sent to Syria. It's the same way home if you die there. And if someone dies, they will be looked after by Iran. The families of martyrs are paid up to $5,000 each. And if they are too poor to pay for the burial, that will be taken care of too."[28]

The Qods Force offered other incentives to the Iraqi militias too. Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, for example, was given Iranian funds to launch its own twenty-four-hour satellite news station, Al-Nujaba. In addition to the usual run of militia propaganda, the station also aired a snappy jingle extolling Qassem Soleimani's virtues and leadership abilities.[29]

AFGHANS AND PAKISTANIS

The Qods Force also recruited Afghans and Pakistanis for the Syrian war. There was precedent for this dating back to the 1980s, when the IRGC created an Afghan militia called Sepah-e Mohammed, which occasionally fought the Soviets, the Afghan communists, and the Taliban. To cite another example: during the "Holy Defense" against Saddam Hussein in the 1980s, the IRGC trained and equipped an all-Afghan fighting force, the Abuzar Brigade.[30]

Many veterans of the Sepah-e Mohammed and Abuzar were still around decades later when Qassem Soleimani created an all-Afghan unit to fight in Syria. An example is Ali Reza Tavassoli, an Afghan Shia who fought against Iraq in the 1980s, attended seminary in Qom, and was living in Mashhad when the Qods Force recruited him to form the Fatemiyoun Battalion for the Syrian fight.[31] When Tavassoli was killed in 2016, other Afghan veterans of the Abuzar took his place. By the end of that year the Fatemiyoun Division had an estimated 12,000 fighters in its ranks, making it one of the largest foreign units fighting on the Syrian government's behalf.[32]

The IRGC's primary recruiting pool for Afghan fighters was the refugee population in Iran, which the United Nations high commissioner for refugees estimated at nearly 3 million. Of this number only a third were documented as refugees, while another half a million had temporary documents and limited-residency permits. That left nearly 1.5 million without any papers at all and therefore vulnerable to periodic deportation sweeps. It was this latter group that provided the largest number of recruits for the Fatemiyoun.[33] The Qods Force offered numerous inducements to convince undocumented Afghan refugees to fight in Syria. The financial ones were impressive enough—five hundred to a thousand dollars per fighter per month, a large sum considering that Afghans earned around two hundred dollars a month laying bricks in Isfahan or twenty-five back home in Bamiyan. In addition to the money, some recruits were offered ten-year residency permits that also included their families, school registration for their children, and the lure of eventual Iranian citizenship.[34]

Also, Afghans facing criminal charges could avoid fines and imprisonment by fighting the Islamic State. However, there were sticks too,

for Afghans who resisted Iranian blandishments. For example, Qods Force recruiters threatened deportation for the undocumented.[35] The IRGC also played on the fears of Afghan Shia regarding their future in Afghanistan. According to one Fatemiyoun recruit, "The Guards commanders were saying that, if it comes to it, we will make Bamian [*sic*] into a base for you, a base for Fatemiyoun."[36]

Afghan recruits normally received (notwithstanding the *Guardian*'s interviewee) thirty days of training in Iran, in the Mashhad area or Varamin, prior to deployment.[37] When they reached Syria they were often used as shock troops, spearheading Qods Force assaults to recapture valuable targets like Aleppo, Palmyra, and Daraa. Indeed, the Fatemiyoun casualty numbers were high, if we credit the Iranian media.[38] Before his death in Baghdad in 2020, Qassem Soleimani tried to use the example of Afghan martyrs in Syria to change the negative perceptions that many Iranians had of Afghan refugees: "Thank God, Afghan people are now viewed differently and are well respected. People visit and honor the graves of Afghan martyrs as they visit and honor holy shrines. … Nothing could have impressed part of the Iranian society in its dealings with Afghan families as much as [Afghan fighters'] martyrdom and their selfless defense of ideals did. There is now a great respect for [Afghans] in Iran."[39]

When the Fatemiyoun Battalion was first created, IRGC recruiters also brought in Shia fighters from Pakistan to fight under its aegis. Most of these were recruited from Parachinar, a predominantly Shia Pashtun district on the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan's Khyber wa Pakhtunwa Province. Later, the Pakistani Shia were numerous enough to create their own Zeinabiyoun Brigade under IRGC management and control.[40] Here was yet another element of Qassem Soleimani's international division of foreign, mostly Shia, combatants fighting to keep Bashar al-Asad in power.

Iran's cynical use of Afghan refugees to prosecute a foreign war may yet ultimately boomerang against it. Unrest among Afghan refugees is a nearly constant concern as it is for security forces in eastern Iran, but the situation could become explosive as the body bags of "martyred" Afghans continue

to flow out of Syria or if the Iranian government fails to honor its pledges of citizenship and residency. Then there are the implications for Afghanistan's security too. As a former head of that country's intelligence service put it, "This is quite dangerous: what happens to this Fatemiyoun force when the war in Syria is over? The fear is that rivalry in the region between Iran and Saudi Arabia will shift to Afghanistan. And I think that clash is already shifting here."[41]

Beyond Afghanistan and its myriad security and geopolitical challenges, Qassem Soleimani's international division will pose a threat to countries that stand up to Iran's expansionist designs. According to Soleimani's successor as Qods Force commander, Brigadier Ismail Qaani, "Fatemiyoun is a new culture, a collection of brave men *who do not see boundaries and borders* in defending Islamic values."[42]

24

General Soleimani Goes to Moscow

Qassem Soleimani's success in forging an unlikely coalition of Iranian, Syrian, Iraqi, Lebanese, Afghan, and Pakistani militias gave the Syrian government the manpower necessary to turn the war in its favor. Yet ground forces alone were not going to secure a decisive victory for President al-Asad. He still faced two major challenges in regaining control of his country: obtaining close air support for his ground forces and convincing Russia that Syria was not a lost cause. The Qods Force commander would be instrumental in solving both.

DIPLOMACY AND CLOSE AIR SUPPORT

The Syrian government's atrocities against its own people are graphically preserved on the Internet, thanks to those who risked their lives to record aircraft dumping "barrel bombs" on populated areas and Asad's use of chemical weapons against civilians.[1] As a consequence, Syria became a pariah in the international community, and even its few friends tended to stay away when the topic of regime human-rights abuses was raised in the United Nations.[2] In short, Syria needed more friends, and Qassem Soleimani was tasked by Ali Khamenei with finding them.

Syria also lacked aircraft and helicopters necessary for close air support. The Syrian air force had all but used up whatever precision-guided munitions it had—hence the barrel bombs—and the war was taking a heavy toll on its helicopters.[3] Qassem Soleimani could not be of much assistance here, since Iran's vintage fleet of 1960s and 1970s U.S.-built fighters was not well suited to the Syrian conflict.[4] Recall the videotaped repulse of

Ismail Heidari's Qods Force unit in August 2013, to which the lack of close air support directly contributed.

There was only one country with the prestige and weaponry to address these two critical Syrian deficiencies. Russia had the diplomatic clout to help ease Bashar's diplomatic isolation, and it was the only major power with both an interest in rescuing the Syrian regime and the capability to project power beyond its borders. The main problem for Asad was persuading the Russian leadership to wade into the Syrian quagmire. The man for that job was Qassem Soleimani.

TEHRAN-MOSCOW RELATIONS

Arguably Soleimani's greatest coalition-building success came in summer 2015, when he persuaded the Russian leadership to rescue Bashar al-Asad with military force. Along with Iran's contribution of ground forces and open lines of credit, Russia's military intervention represented a turning point in Asad's fortunes. As far as Moscow was concerned, its Syria deployment not only enhanced Russian prestige but also demonstrated Russia's ability to fight and win wars in distant parts of the world. This was no mean feat considering how far the Russian military had sunk in the 1990s after the implosion of the Soviet Union.

But the shared victories of 2015 and 2016 were by no means predestined, and Russian-Iranian relations have experienced more than their share of turbulence over the years. When the 1979 Revolution forced the ouster of the shah and allowed the return of Ayatollah Khomeini, Moscow was cautiously hopeful. The revolution removed an American client in the shah, and the Soviets had good reason to hope that the powerful and well-organized communist Tudeh Party would exploit a chaotic situation and seize power. This would have represented a dramatic victory for Moscow in its effort to gain influence over its southern flank.[5] But Khomeini and his militant followers obliterated the left in the early 1980s, and Iran-Soviet relations were frigidly polite at best. In fact, Khomeini routinely pilloried both the United States and the Soviet Union, insisting that the appeal of his revolution was its emphatic rejection of both East and West.[6]

It wasn't until the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and the breakup of the Soviet Union that Tehran and Moscow laid the foundations for a

rapprochement. Both were wary of enhanced American power as demonstrated by the 1991 defeat of Saddam Hussein's armies during Desert Storm. Iran purchased Russian weapons like Kilo-class diesel submarines and refrained from meddling in Russia's Chechnya problem. The two found common cause in thwarting the regional ambitions of the Afghan Taliban, which was viewed as a pawn of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and even the United States.[7]

Russia's relations with Syria were more enduring. During the Cold War the Soviets had sold or bartered weapons, and in return the Syrians had granted them access to Tartous, a Syrian port that became Russia's only naval base in the eastern Mediterranean. When the Soviet Union collapsed, Moscow's influence in Syria took a hit. Like the Iranians, the Russians were especially concerned that the wily Hafez al-Asad might one day sell out to Israel and the United States by making a deal over the Golan Heights. When the Arab Spring swept over Syria in 2011, many Russian policy makers were quietly skeptical that his son Bashar al-Asad could survive the cataclysm. Nonetheless, Moscow was still smarting over lost Middle East client states like Saddam Hussein's Iraq in 2003 and Muammar Qadhafi's Libya in 2011–12. If Syria fell to the rebels, Russia would essentially be locked out of the Middle East.

WOOING MOSCOW

After numerous meetings with the senior Syrian leadership as well as visits to the Syrian battlefront, Qassem Soleimani was convinced that the Syrian regime could be saved. He provided, as we saw in the last chapter, more Qods Force advisers and a patchwork of Hezbollah fighters and foreign militias, but Soleimani could not provide close air support in the form of attack helicopters and strike aircraft.

In 2012, Qassem Soleimani sent a letter to the Russian government pleading for a direct military commitment to prop up Asad.[8] He probably outlined Syria's needs in terms of weapons, ammunition, and other materiel, adding that Iran would cover the expenses involved. For its part, Russia was happy to entertain the Qods Force commander's requests, especially since Tehran would be paying cash up front, but committing Russian military forces to Syria was another matter. Moscow's eyes were still trained on its

“near abroad”—ex-Soviet republics on the Russian periphery like Estonia, Georgia, and Ukraine.[9] Russia’s 2014 intervention in Crimea and later eastern Ukraine had triggered Western sanctions, and Moscow was understandably wary of committing itself to another foreign military adventure.

Another obstacle to Russian involvement in Syria was Iran itself, specifically the uncertainty surrounding its nuclear program. On 14 July 2015, that particular problem was temporarily shelved when Moscow joined the other Permanent United Nations Security Council members plus Germany and Iran in signing the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, which placed certain verifiable restrictions on Iran’s nuclear effort in return for a gradual lifting of international sanctions. Within ten days of signing the nuclear deal, Soleimani was on a plane to Moscow, where he reportedly met President Vladimir Putin, the Russian defense minister, and the head of military intelligence. Soleimani came armed with a map of Syria detailing the location and disposition of government and rebel forces. He admitted that the condition of the Syrian military was dire but repeatedly argued that the Syrian government could be rescued if it were supplied with weapons, intelligence, and close air support. Soleimani also reminded the Russians of the dangers for Russian interests in the Middle East of a rebel victory in Damascus, including the loss of the base at Tartous.[10]

Qassem Soleimani made several more visits to Moscow over the next two years.[11] His agendas probably included Iranian financing of additional Russian arms deliveries to Syria, the acquisition of an advanced SA-20c Gargoyle surface-to-air missile system for Iran itself, and upcoming Iranian-Russian-Syrian military operations. Another result of these talks was the creation of a joint intelligence center in Baghdad that included participants from Iran, Russia, Syria, Hezbollah, and Iraq. The Iranians could be excused for believing that all of this was the beginning of a new alliance system in the Middle East.[12]

Unfortunately for Iranians, however, their country’s regional power had sharp limits, and these affected the relationship with Russia. One symbol of those limits, ironically, was Qassem Soleimani himself. His visits to Russia, although conducted in some semblance of secrecy, were bound to be exposed sooner or later and, since he was subject to a formal United Nations travel ban, to embarrass the Russian government. Usually the

Russians denied items in the Western press of the Qods Force commander's meetings, but the Iranians refused to follow suit. For example, when the international media picked upon Soleimani's not-so-secret trip to Moscow in December 2015, Russian press advisers predictably dismissed the allegations.[13] But the Iranian Supreme Leader's top adviser on foreign policy, Ali Akbar Velayati, publicly heralded Soleimani's visit as a sign of close bilateral relations: "General Soleymani's visits [to Russia] and coordination with Russian officials under the current situation where Iran and Russia are boosting their alliance in their fight against terrorist groups is absolutely normal."[14]

Again, it was in Tehran's interest to play up talk of new military agreements with Russia; it enhanced Iranian influence and provided diplomatic top cover in the United Nations Security Council. Moscow, on the other hand, was not inclined to commit itself to a long-term understanding with Iran, whose dubious record on nuclear technology and support for extremist groups was a definite liability. As would become clear in 2016 and 2017, Russia had its own defined goals for Syria, and they did not always coincide with Iran's.

RUSSIAN INTERVENTION

In September 2015, Western intelligence agencies began picking up signs of increased activity at airfields in Damascus and Latakia. Giant An-124 Condor transport aircraft were flying into these airports daily and off-loading infantry fighting vehicles, T-90 tanks, artillery, and surface-to-air missile batteries. Accompanying this hardware were Russian combat aircraft, including Su-24 Fencers, Su-25s, and Mi-24 Hind attack helicopters.[15] Even the Russian navy's aging aircraft carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov* made an appearance in the eastern Mediterranean, after a long journey from its home port on the Kola Peninsula.[16]

The purpose behind this impressive display of Russian military hardware was soon made manifest in a new Syrian government offensive against rebel forces in the southern Aleppo governorate. Qassem Soleimani reportedly had a key role in planning and executing this operation, which aimed at cutting off the road links between rebel-held areas in Aleppo and Idlib.[17] The Iranians alone contributed more than two thousand soldiers to

the attacking force, with units from the Qods Force, *Saberin* commandos, regular IRGC, Basij, and the regular army. Fighting alongside them was a cadre of fighters from Hezbollah, various Iraqi Shia militias, and Syrian sectarian paramilitaries. The primary Russian contribution comprised strike aircraft and helicopters flying close-air-support missions. At one point in the battle, Russian warships in the Caspian Sea fired cruise missiles, which flew over Iranian territory before striking Syrian rebel targets.[18]

With the arrival of the Russians, Syrian airspace became even more congested, especially above contested battlefields. In addition to routine sorties by the Syrian air force, the Turks were flying enhanced patrols over southern Turkey, a U.S.-led coalition was engaged in combat in southern and eastern Syria, and Israeli fighter jets frequently entered Syria to bomb Hezbollah and Qods Force targets. In addition to Russian combat and support aircraft based in Syria, others sortied from Russia itself, using aerial refueling and stopping over at the Iranian air force base at Hamadan. This was an important development in its own right, since it was the first time that Iran had allowed a foreign military to use its soil for combat operations since the 1979 Revolution.[19]

On 24 November 2015, the perils of military operations in such congested airspace came into sharp relief when two Turkish air force F-16s shot down a Russian Su-24 Fencer in what Ankara claimed was Turkish airspace. Two parachutes were seen to open as the Russian jet crashed into the ground enveloped in flames. The Russians immediately launched a combat search-and-rescue mission, but the pilots had landed in Syrian territory close to rebel-held lines. Under fire from man-portable air-defense systems, the Russians were forced to abort the rescue mission.

Qassem Soleimani was in Syria at this time, supervising the operation to recapture southern Aleppo. According to Russian and Iranian media accounts, the Qods Force commander promptly contacted the Russians and offered to assist in getting the downed aviators out. In a revealing demonstration of his control over both Syrian and allied forces, Soleimani quickly cobbled together a rescue force of six Lebanese Hezbollah fighters and eighteen Syrian commandos. The team infiltrated six kilometers behind rebel lines, where they linked up with the copilot—the pilot had been killed during the descent—before exfiltration by Russian helicopters.[20] According

to one press account, Qassem Soleimani "stayed in the operations room until he [was] assured of their success."[21]

DIVERGENT GOALS

The rescue of the Russian pilot marked a high tide of sorts in Iranian-Russian relations in Syria. Although they both continued to work closely in Syria, the divergence between their objectives in that country was bound to emerge sooner or later. Moreover, the balance of power between the two began to shift in 2016 and 2017, as more Russian military power was deployed into Syria. At times they clashed over fundamentals such as restructuring the Syrian armed forces.[22]

Russia had intervened with military force in Syria to showcase its return to great-power status. Not only would the humiliations of "losing" Iraq and Libya be partially erased but all parties in the Middle East would be signaled that Moscow stood by its friends. An important corollary to this goal was a desire to throttle back American influence in the region generally and, specifically, limit Washington's ability to leverage events on the ground in Syria. Vladimir Putin had intended to step in with the "correct" application of military force that would not only turn the tide against the Syrian rebels but keep Russian casualties to a minimum. Ultimately, Putin may have hoped to mediate a settlement of the Syrian conflict that would maximize Russian prestige, minimize America's, and give Bashar al-Asad the time he needed to neutralize the insurgency and restore his control over Syria.

Iran's goals, as reflected by the Qods Force's actions on the ground since 2011, were quite different. Like Russia, Qassem Soleimani intended to project Iranian power in Syria, even if he had to rely on Russian airpower to do it. Iran wanted to use Syria as a long-term base of operations from which it could further pressure Israel, either directly with a Qods Force presence in Syria or via proxies like Hezbollah, Syrian and Iraqi militias, or various Palestinian extremist groups. Long-term peace was (and is) not necessarily one of Iran's goals for Syria so long as its war against Israel, the United States, and Saudi Arabia continues.

The problem of clashing Iranian and Israeli objectives is covered in the next chapter. Qassem Soleimani was now presiding, and would until his death in January 2020, over an impressive, if costly, expansion of Iranian long-term influence in Syria. It appeared that Iran’s expansive ambitions could result in the first direct war between Iran and Israel over the future of the Middle East, with dangerous consequences for all concerned.

25
Entrenchment

The Golan Heights are universally regarded as strategic real estate in a part of the world that has been coveted, fought over, and occupied for nearly two millennia of recorded history. From the 9,232-foot peak of Mount Hermon in the north, the Golan slopes downward to about a thousand feet above sea level in its southern and eastern extent. The Golan Heights not only contain the headwaters of rivers like the Jordan and the Yarmouk but overlook Damascus and the Huleh Valley, which has been called the “breadbasket” of Israel.[1]

From 1946 to 1967 the Golan Heights were exclusively Syrian territory, and the Syrian army planted bunkers and other military infrastructure there. Syrian artillery would periodically fire shells into the Israeli settlements of Upper Galilee just to remind the Israelis that the two states were still legally in a state of war. In 1967, the Israel Defense Forces put a stop to this irritant by attacking the Golan Heights and dislodging the Syrian army from them. Except for a brief interregnum during the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, the Golan has been occupied and administered by Israel ever since.

Commanding the high ground confers obvious military and intelligence advantages. The Israeli intelligence community utilizes Mount Hermon for SIGINT collection and visual observation of Syrian activity in the plains below. It is therefore not without reason that the Golan in general and Mount Hermon in particular have been described as the “eyes and ears” of Israel.

As we saw in chapter 21, the Golan Heights were Israel’s quietest border from 1974 to 2012.[2] There were two reasons for this. One, the Syrians did not want to trigger Israeli military retaliation by destabilizing the Golan.

Two, the Syrian government entertained the hope that Israel would eventually return the Golan Heights to Syrian custody in return for a peace settlement. Consequently the Syrians viewed Hezbollah in neighboring Lebanon as a way to wage war on Israel indirectly, without inviting attacks on Syria itself.

QODS FORCE STRATEGY

For Iran, Syria's most valuable regional ally, the Golan Heights dispute was largely an academic question. Syria had eventually acquiesced in the rise of Hezbollah as a "resistance" force against Israel's occupation of southern Lebanon, but Damascus would not tolerate a similar group operating from Syrian soil to liberate the occupied Golan. During the first five years of the Syrian civil war (2011–16), the Syrian side of the Golan Heights was relatively calm. The rebels had captured several cities in the region, including Daraa (where the war began) and Quneitra; however, isolated Syrian garrisons held out for several years.

Qassem Soleimani's top priority for Syria during this phase of the conflict was stabilizing Bashar al-Asad's regime with infusions of cash, weapons, combatants, and military advisers. To facilitate all this, the Qods Force built new infrastructure at Damascus International Airport and Latakia Airport on Syria's Mediterranean coast. New Qods Force command-and-control, intelligence, and logistics facilities were established at the Damascus airport.[3]

Another Soleimani priority was creating an anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) zone in southern Lebanon. Although most Syrians were probably not aware of it, starting in late 2011 and continuing through 2020, Iranian transport planes routinely used Iraqi airspace (Soleimani having greased the skids with friends in Baghdad) to ferry weapons, ammunition, technical equipment, soldiers, and advisers to Damascus—and later Latakia—for forward delivery to either Hezbollah or the Syrian military.[4] The essentials for an effective A2/AD zone in southern Lebanon were rockets, accurate surface-to-surface missiles, new surface-to-air missiles, and antiship cruise missiles.[5] As these weapons flowed into Hezbollah arsenals, the prospective costs for Israel of another war with Hezbollah rose, and alarmingly. Qassem Soleimani liked to tell his foreign associates that "Iran stood by its friends."

The steady expansion of Hezbollah's already formidable military capabilities was intended in part to show that the Qods Force commander backed up his words with deeds.

ISRAEL'S STRATEGY

In the early years of the war Syria, when Bashar al-Asad's prospects were doubtful and the rebellion was spreading fast, Israel avoided direct involvement. The Israelis kept their eyes and ears open, however, for new developments, such as the escalating involvement of Iran, Hezbollah, Turkey, and eventually Russia. Israeli intelligence certainly noticed the marked increase in Qods Force arms shipments to Hezbollah. The IDF was especially concerned that accurate Iranian surface-to-surface missiles like the Fateh-110 were reaching Hezbollah. With a range estimated between three hundred to five hundred kilometers, the Fateh-110 could reach targets throughout Israel, and its accuracy made it a weapon with which Hezbollah could hit sensitive military targets like command-and-control centers, air bases, and port facilities.[6]

For decades Israel's strategy has been built around preemptively attacking threats before they jeopardized Israeli national-security interests. Therefore, when Qassem Soleimani set about building an A2/AD zone in southern Lebanon, Israel went on the offensive. In autumn 2012 the Israeli air force (IAF) began striking suspected arms convoys as they departed Qods Force warehouses in Damascus for the Lebanese border.[7] Often the Israelis neither confirmed nor denied these attacks, so as to undermine Hezbollah's justification for retaliation. Not that this strategy always worked, but in the chaotic conditions created by Syria's civil war it wasn't always clear who perpetrated attacks on arms convoys.

On 30 January 2013, a probable IAF strike on one such convoy was aimed at destroying, or at least delaying the deployment of, the potent Russian-built SA-17 Grizzly SAM before it reached Hezbollah.[8] Two weeks later, in a separate air strike, the Israelis killed Brigadier Hassan Shateri, a prominent Qods Force logistics expert, whose name (and alias, Hessam Khoshnevis) we have seen several times (in chapters 8, 20, and 21). He had helped restore Hezbollah's military capabilities after the 2006 war with Israel and in 2012 had supervised the construction of Qods Force's

infrastructure in Syria.[9] His loss was a considerable blow for Tehran, and his state funeral was attended by the deputy Qods Force commander, Brigadier Ismail Qaani.[10]

Throughout the summer and fall of 2013 Israel continued to strike at targets linked to the Fateh-110 missile in Syria.[11] In addition, separate attacks were conducted against Syrian supply depots housing components of the highly lethal SS-N-26 Strobile antiship cruise missile (also known as the Yakhont). Originally purchased from Russia, the SS-N-26 was likely intended by Damascus to compensate Hezbollah for its alliance with Asad.[12] During the 2006 war, as we have seen, Hezbollah had surprised the Israeli navy by striking a corvette with an older and slower Iranian-made C-802 missile. Clearly, the Israelis did not intend to be surprised again.

THE TIDE TURNS

By 2015 the war had definitely begun to shift in Bashar al-Asad's favor, even though much of his country remained in rebel hands. The hemorrhaging of his forces had stopped, thanks in no small measure to Qassem Soleimani's ability to create militias and weld together unlikely coalitions. As the pressure on the Syrian government eased, Soleimani's Qods Force began reassessing its goals in Syria. The emphasis now became confronting Israel from Syria. The traditional Hezbollah battleground in southern Lebanon would be extended eastward to include new military bases in Syria near the Israeli border.

Both the Qods Force and Hezbollah probably viewed the Golan Heights through a Lebanon lens. After all, for fifteen years (1985–2000) the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon had justified the existence of Hezbollah's militia as a resistance force. When the Israelis withdrew from Lebanon in 2000, Hezbollah had raised the canard of Shabaa Farms being Lebanese territory to continue its attacks on the IDF. In the eyes of Tehran and Hezbollah, that the Golan was "occupied" meant that the IDF there could be given the same treatment.

As the Syrian government's motley assortment of regular soldiers, sectarian militias, and foreign allies began recapturing ground, Qassem Soleimani and his bosses in Tehran could dream that liberating Jerusalem from Israeli occupation was tantalizingly closer than it had ever been

before. Indeed, the Qods Force had been named after Jerusalem, and its genesis was linked to Ayatollah Khomeini's apparent belief that the path to the liberation of Jerusalem lay through Karbala. *Jomhuri Islami*, a mouthpiece for Tehran hard-liners, spelled out this vision in an editorial: "The Zionist regime that was concerned about the threats from the Lebanese borders, now should prepare itself for a new situation [on the Golan Heights]."[13]

Of course, the Qods Force would not act alone in building the new front against Israel. Its ever-loyal Lebanese handmaiden, Hezbollah, would accompany it and help build in the Syrian Golan rocket and missile bases of the kinds that had been so successful against Israel in 2006. Soleimani probably handpicked the two Lebanese lieutenants who spearheaded the new project. One was Jihad Mughniyah, the twenty-six-year-old son of Imad Mughniyah, famous for introducing the suicide truck bomber to the Middle East and South America. After Imad Mughniyah's 2008 assassination in Damascus, the Qods Force commander had taken Jihad under his wing and mentored him in the dark arts of terrorism and subversion.[14] The second Soleimani lieutenant was Samir Kuntar. Born into a Lebanese Druze family, Kuntar was notorious in Israel for his 1979 role in the murder of an Israeli father and his child during a terrorist raid in northern Israel. Released by Israel in a prisoner swap with Hezbollah years later, Samir Kuntar became a freelance terrorist and ended up working for the Iranians. His new assignment would be creating a Hezbollah facsimile in Syria with the goal of liberating the Golan Heights from Israeli occupation.[15]

The immediate trigger for heightened tensions in the Golan occurred on 18 January 2015, when Israeli F-16s struck a three-vehicle convoy on the Syrian side of the border. Among those killed were Jihad Mughniyah, at least five other Hezbollah combatants, and an Iranian brigadier general, Mohammed Ali Allahdadi. This latter figure was a Qods Force ballistic-missile expert, and his having died in the Syrian Golan indicates he had been surveying the area for future launch sites.[16] Once again the Israelis were silent on responsibility for the strike, but neither Hezbollah nor the Qods Force harbored any doubts. At Allahdadi's funeral in Iran the slain Qods Force officer was praised as a "martyred commander, who was killed directly with a Zionist bullet."[17] Brigadier Qaani directed his remarks

squarely at the Israelis: “Everyone knows that you are not man enough to fight in the battlefield. You are cowards because you just want to reach your goals by carrying out assassinations.”[18] In a separate communication passed to the Americans through an intermediary, the Iranian Foreign Ministry sent a more nuanced but still threatening message: “The Zionist regime crossed Iran’s red lines by this action.”[19]

Hezbollah’s response to the deaths of Mughniyah, Allahdadi, and the others came eleven days later. On 29 January, a Kornet ATGM was fired at an IDF vehicle in Shabaa Farms, killing two Israeli soldiers. As was customary in the Israel-Hezbollah feud, the Israelis retaliated with artillery shells and air strikes on Hezbollah positions in southern Lebanon.[20]

These salvos indicated that both sides were looking to redefine the rules of their game. The old rules had been created for a different conflict, one focused on Israel’s border with southern Lebanon. The changing circumstances—the Syrian civil war, with the introduction of Hezbollah forces and Iranian combat units into Syria—injected a new note of uncertainty in the tacit IDF-Hezbollah understanding. For now it seemed as if Hezbollah would retaliate from southern Lebanon for Israeli attacks on its forces in Syria.

For their part, the Israelis wanted to make clear to both Hezbollah and the Iranians that they too had red lines on attacking the Israeli Golan from Syria. In June 2015, the Israeli defense minister, Moshe Yalon, spelled them out:

- Israel would not permit “the delivery of advanced weapons to any terror organization whether by Iran or Syria.”
- Israel would not allow the transfer of weapons of mass destruction, such as Syrian chemical weapons, to any “terror faction.”
- Israel would not “allow any violation of our sovereignty, especially in the Golan Heights.”[21]

An unspoken corollary to Yalon’s statement was that rocket attacks against the Israeli Golan would produce responses of disproportionate scale against the Syrian Golan.[22]

Around the same time, the Israelis were also engaged in an information operation against Qassem Soleimani. Part of this effort was trying to convince the Syrian leaders that Soleimani's dominance of their military and his overt role in prosecuting the campaign against the Syrian rebels were direct threats to Syrian independence. The IDF Chief of the General Staff, Lt. Gen. Gadi Eizenkot, exemplified this new public emphasis on the Qods Force commander with a statement that "Soleimani is the center of gravity of the Middle East."[23]

Whatever setbacks Allahdadi's and Mughniyah's deaths may have imposed on Iranian strategy, Qassem Soleimani proceeded with his Golan plans in 2015. On one level, he supervised Syrian, Hezbollah, and Qods Force operations to recapture Daraa and Quneitra. He established a forward command post in the area, with the expectation that rocket and missile bases would soon follow.[24] He also decided to play the Palestinian card against the Israeli-controlled Golan to ascertain Israel's limits and gauge its reactions. On 20 August 2015, the Palestine Islamic Jihad fired four rockets into the Israeli Golan and the Upper Galilee region from Syria. The PIJ operation resulted in no Israeli casualties. However, if it was indeed a trial balloon, it succeeded: the Israelis retaliated in keeping with their recently established rules.[25] On the 21st Israeli artillery shelled Quneitra while strike fighters launched air-to-surface missiles against targets in the Syrian Golan. The Israeli retaliation killed at least five, although their identities and affiliations were disputed.[26]

Despite all the bluster on the Iranian side, such as the ill-advised boast that Syria was an Iranian province, the Qods Force suffered a number of setbacks in 2015.[27] One was the strike that killed Jihad Mughniyah and Brigadier Allahdadi. Another was the loss of Samir Kuntar, who was welding together the National Syrian Opposition in the Golan when he was killed by a probable Israeli missile.[28] Also, Iran failed to establish a land corridor across Iraq and Syria to the Mediterranean. The presence of Syrian rebels in several key towns along the way was one hurdle. U.S. forces in eastern Syria constituted another.[29]

CONFRONTATIONS

Nevertheless, Tehran and its allies would reap the benefits in 2016 and 2017 of the improvement in the Syrian government's fortunes in 2015. Iranian leaders began declaring that 2017 would be the "year of victory" over Islamic State (if partly because their own public was starting to show signs of war weariness). On the ground in Syria, Qassem Soleimani and his lieutenants focused on giving Hezbollah the capability to produce its own precision-guided munitions and creating the much-discussed corridor to the Mediterranean. They did so pursuant to Iran's ambitions in the Levant as publicly enunciated by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's top foreignpolicy adviser, Ali Akbar Velayati: "The chain of resistance against Israel by Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, the Iraqi government and Hamas passes through the Syrian highway Syria is the golden ring of the chain of resistance against Israel."[30]

Israel too was reappraising the Syrian conflict in 2016. One concern was Iran's prospective land route to the Mediterranean. Others included the increased Qods Force and Hezbollah presence in the Syrian Golan, the growing numbers of Qods Force combatants at Syrian military bases, Hezbollah's attempt to produce accurate ballistic missiles, and the dramatic growth in the number of pro-Iranian Shiite militia fighters.[31] By the end of 2016, the IDF estimated there were nearly 3,000 Qods Force combatants in Syria, 8,000 Hezbollah fighters, and 11,000 "other" Shiites (Afghans, Iraqis, Pakistanis, and Yemenis).[32]

In January 2017, the Israeli cabinet authorized the IDF to strike Qods Force installations throughout Syria.[33] The Israeli intelligence minister, Chagai Tzuriel, told the French newspaper *Le Monde* in July 2017 that Tehran was attempting to "redraw the strategic map of the region." He also highlighted the threat posed by Iranian aid to Hezbollah in the making of accurate surface-to-surface missiles: "The factories would allow Hezbollah to construct and modernize its own missiles with Iranian technical help."[34] He made it equally clear that Israel intended to stop this.

As the Qods Force, Hezbollah, and their Shiite allies infiltrated the Syrian side of the Golan, the Israelis elevated their public diplomacy campaign against Iran. It warned the international community that Syria was at serious risk of becoming an Iranian satellite and that the Israelis would do what had to be done to prevent this from occurring.[35] At multiple levels, the Israeli government declared that Iran would not be allowed to "entrench" itself in Syria.[36]

On 28 April 2017, at around 3:30 in the morning, Damascus residents were awakened by a series of explosions at Damascus International Airport. The Iranian transport "ferry" aircraft had been landing at Damascus and Latakia in the midnight hour to avoid Israeli and American intelligence collection, and that night two planes had just unloaded their cargoes when Israeli air-to-surface missiles slammed into nearby Qods Force arms-storage bunkers. In keeping with their modus operandi, the Israelis neither confirmed nor denied responsibility.[37]

DROPPING THE GLOVES

A master strategist, especially in fighting unconventional wars, Qassem Soleimani was throughout 2017 and 2018 constantly probing and testing Israel's limits. How much violence would the IDF be willing to sustain on its side of the Golan? Would the Israelis go to war with Iran and its loosely knit confederation of allies to prevent the Qods Force and Hezbollah from building rocket/missile bases in the Syrian Golan? The only way to find out was to test Israeli resolve, and repeatedly.

On 9 February 2018, a drone allegedly operated by the Qods Force took off from Syria's T-4 airbase near Palmyra. Once airborne the drone steered a course for Jordan, violated that country's airspace, and then flew over the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights for ninety seconds before an Israeli AH-64 Apache helicopter shot it down. After investigating the wreckage, the Israelis reported that the drone contained explosives and therefore was not on a reconnaissance mission as some had initially suggested.[38] It was largely academic anyway, because by 5:34 in the morning of 9 February the Israelis had scrambled an eight-ship formation of F-16s that fired air-to-surface missiles at the T-4 base. One of these weapons allegedly killed Col. Mehdi Dehgan, the Qods Force drone expert. The raid was not a complete success for the Israelis, however. A Syrian SAM had struck one of the F-16s, forcing its pilot and navigator to bail out over northern Israel. It was the IAF's first loss to a Syrian SAM since 1982.[39] At 8:45 that morning the IAF generated multiple sorties against Syrian airdefense sites, four unspecified Qods Force positions, and a headquarters element of Syria's 4th Armored Division.[40] Commenting on this second raid, an IDF source stated,

“It was the first time we attacked live Iranian targets—both facilities and people.”[41]

After this fierce response to his drone mission, Qassem Soleimani waited for several weeks before testing Israeli resolve again. Shortly after midnight on 9 May 2018, the Qods Force or its militia allies fired thirty Grad and Fajr artillery rockets from Syria at IDF positions in the Golan Heights. At least four of these were intercepted by an Israeli antirocket system called Iron Dome. Israeli sources reported that this direct attack on Israel constituted Iran’s first and as such was an important milestone in the forty-year Iran-Israel struggle for power in the Middle East. Still, the rockets that penetrated the Iron Dome screen inflicted no casualties, perhaps implying that the Qods Force was once again just testing the waters.[42]

In retaliation the Israelis launched Operation House of Cards, a major escalation involving dozens of F-15s and F-16s striking more than eighty targets on multiple Syrian bases. Among them were Iranian intelligencecollection facilities, Qods Force logistics centers and training camps, and Syrian air-defense sites.[43] Israel’s minister of intelligence offered this justification for the size and scope of the response: “There is a risk of escalation, but we think that a tough stance now can prevent a major conflict later. We must convince the Iranians that it is not in their interests, strategically, to pursue their efforts to establish themselves militarily in Syria and to try to construct a forward base there against Israel.”[44]

THE RUSSIA FACTOR

Since Qassem Soleimani had enlisted its military support in 2015, Moscow’s role in the Syrian war had increased significantly. Indeed, Russian combat aircraft were instrumental in helping Asad regain the initiative in 2015 and 2016. The Iranians certainly played up their new alliance with Russia, but Moscow was ambivalent about its Qods Force partner. To be sure, Russia wanted to “win” in Syria; even a fig leaf would cover a Russian military withdrawal. Iran, for its part, didn’t want so much to *win* in Syria as to *use* Syria for the larger war against Israel. This daylight between Iranian and Russian objectives gave Israel some negotiation room in which to deal with Moscow.

It is no surprise then that Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu became a frequent visitor to Russia. In meetings with the Russian leadership Netanyahu pounded home Israel's concerns about Iranian meddling in Syria and urged that the Russians pressure Soleimani into pulling out of the Golan. The Russians generally said the right things to the Israelis, such as their desire for the Syrian army to monitor the Syrian Golan alone, but Moscow's ability or willingness actually to compel the Qods Force and its allies to do anything was a different matter altogether.[45]

In any case, the Israeli air strikes continued, most never acknowledged by Jerusalem. One (anonymous) IDF official claimed in 2018 that Israel had conducted at least two hundred air strikes since 2016 and that most of the intended targets had been Iranian.[46] On 20 January 2019, for example, an Iranian Fateh-110 surface-to-surface missile was launched from a base near Damascus and was heading toward Israel when it was successfully intercepted by Iron Dome. The Israeli counterstrike came the next day, against Qods Force targets at Damascus International Airport, an Iranian electronic-intelligence facility, a Qods Force training camp, and Syrian air-defense sites.[47] According to an IDF spokesman, "We see a clear presence of Qods forces in Damascus International Airport, inside Syrian army bases and even Qods Force buildings right next to Syrian armed forces."[48]

CONCLUSIONS

By 2020 the Israeli air force was still striking Qods Force and Syrian military targets. Although the list of targets had started to sound like a litany (how many times could the Qods Force command facility at Damascus International Airport be struck by bombs and missiles?), the Israelis wanted to ensure that Iran never entrenched itself in Syria. To put it another way, the Israelis would never allow Iran to build an elaborate air-defense capability to protect its Syrian investments. The same rule also applied to the Syrians.

The IDF did maintain a modus vivendi with Hezbollah: their conflict remained limited to southern Lebanon and Shabaa Farms, although the Israelis reserved the right to strike Hezbollah arms convoys en route to Lebanon from Damascus or Latakia. Yet even then the Israelis followed a certain protocol: the IDF would warn Hezbollah that a certain convoy was

about to be attacked. The goal was minimizing Hezbollah casualties and limiting the potential for crisis escalation.[49]

Yet for all their bombing in Syria, the Israelis had not been able to prevent the Qods Force from taking root there. A growing network of command-and-control centers, weapons-storage depots, training camps, weapons factories, and signals-intelligence sites had emerged despite the bombs and missiles that had been rained on them. Tehran was simply willing to absorb the costs of frequent Israeli air raids, because the gains were greater. By entrenching itself in Syria the Qods Force gained leverage over Israel. The ability to strike Israel with rockets and missiles from either southern Lebanon or Syria gave Iran more deterrent capacity against Israel. Any Israeli plan to bomb Iranian nuclear infrastructure, for example, would have to anticipate retaliatory rocket and missile strikes from Syria on Israeli military and civilian targets. Finally, by committing so much of its blood and treasure to Syria, Tehran had earned a seat at any future peace settlement involving Syria, Lebanon, or Israel. Iran had come a long way since the early 1990s, when it was locked out of the Madrid Peace Conference by the United States, Israel, and their allies.

Still, for all the apparent gains for Iranian foreign and national security policy, the Syrian war has been a costly adventure for Iran, for the Qods Force in particular. In addition to hundreds of its own combatants, the Qods Force has lost some valuable, experienced commanders—men like Hassan Shateri, Mohammed Ali Allahdadi, and Hossein Hamadani. As for its leader, Qassem Soleimani, his Waterloo awaited him in Iraq.

PART VI

Soleimani in Iraq: Soldier and Politician

26

Everywhere but Nowhere

The crises in Syria and Iraq stretched Qassem Soleimani's talents as a soldier, diplomat, and politician. If Soleimani maintained a low profile in Syria because of diplomatic sensitivities, Iraq was a different story. Indeed, Iraq became the Qods Force commander's personal show, a stage where he publicly displayed his charisma and arts of persuasion and intimidation. Qassem Soleimani made and unmade Iraqi leaders. When the militant Salafist Islamic State invaded Iraq in 2014, it was Soleimani who led the charge against it. Indeed, at times the colorless, dour Iraqi prime ministers seemed overshadowed in their own country by this brash foreigner who didn't shy away from public appearances.

When we examine Soleimani's last six years, it is hard to understand how he was able to keep up the pace he set for himself. At any given moment he seemed to be everywhere at once: in Syria, directing the recapture of Aleppo; in Lebanon, cajoling Hassan Nasrallah into giving him more combat troops; in Iraq, planning offensives or browbeating the Kurds into dropping an independence referendum. But in the end, nothing symbolized Soleimani's domination of Iranian foreign policy as much as his role in both instigating and resolving Iraq's interminable crises.

SOLEIMANI AS POLITICIAN

On 7 March 2010, Iraq went through national elections, its quadrennial rite of passage to determine the composition and policies of a new government. Once again, a bewildering mélange of parties, factions, coalitions, and personalities vied for the privileges of power. Once again, the process of

actually forming a government took nearly a year. From the moment election results were announced, Qassem Soleimani's paramount objective was preventing the apparent winner, Ayad Allawi, from assembling a cabinet. Iran did not trust Allawi, for a number of reasons; at the top of the list was his proximity to the Americans.[1]

For nearly ten months—from March to November 2010—Soleimani and other Iranian officials bargained, threatened, wheedled, pleaded, and bribed to ensure that Nuri al-Maliki returned to the prime minister's job. Iran's ability to shape the outcome was enhanced by several major advantages. One of these was intelligence: thanks to the Iranian intelligence community's decades-long focus on Iraq, Soleimani had better information on Iraqi politics than anybody else, including the Iraqis. He also commanded the support of powerful militias like the Badr Organization and Kataib Hezbollah, which gave him muscle to back up his demands. Tehran also bought its way into power. By 2011, the Qods Force was spending at least $9 million per month on the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq and another $8 million on Muqtada al-Sadr's enormous (if disjointed) political movement.[2] Then there was the simple fact that Qassem Soleimani was often *there*—in Baghdad's Green Zone—wheeling and dealing, spending money in bribes, and issuing threats when necessary.[3]

Finally, there was the United States, which aided Soleimani's cause by backing Maliki over Allawi, even though the latter's party commanded more seats. The American embassy was certainly aware of Tehran's growing influence, as a November 2010 cable makes clear: "Iran's tools of influence include financial support to (and pressure on) a cross-spectrum of Iraqi parties and officials, economic development assistance, notably to religious organizations, lethal aid to select militant Shia proxies; and sanctuary to Iraqi figures fearful of [U.S. government] targeting."[4]

By September 2010, however, even Tehran's patience with the feuding Iraqi politicians was wearing thin. After months of horse trading and threats, Soleimani had rammed through an Iraqi coalition that did not include Ayad Allawi but did incorporate recalcitrant Sadrists. The Qods Force commander convened an Iraqi leadership summit in the Iranian religious capital of Qom, where he dictated the terms and conditions of the new Iraqi entente.[5] The U.S. military would soon depart Iraq, he informed his audience, but Iran was a permanent neighbor, whose interests had to be

acknowledged by any Iraqi government. Nuri al-Maliki would remain prime minister, as would Jalal Talabani as president. Any Iraqis who defied this diktat, he warned, would quickly regret it.[6]

Not surprisingly, Nuri al-Maliki's new government was distinctly more pro-Iranian than its predecessors. As part of the price he had to pay for Iranian and Sadrist support, Maliki informed the Americans that he would not renew Iraq's security agreement with the U.S. military. This meant that Washington would withdraw the last of its forces from Iraq by 31 December 2011. The CIA-sponsored Iraqi National Intelligence Service was all but disbanded; its once-powerful and effective Iran Division was thoroughly purged (with grievous consequences for Iraqi counterintelligence). Two Soleimani acolytes now had influential positions in government: Hadi al-Ameri as minister of transportation and Abu Mahdi al-Mohandis as an adviser to the prime minister.[7]

SOLEIMANI AS SOLDIER

Qassem Soleimani was a soldier above all else. One gets the sense that although he performed the duties of diplomat and politician quite well, he enjoyed nothing more than laying out a campaign map with close comrades and planning his next offensive. For years Soleimani had schemed and maneuvered against the United States. His Qods Force had grappled with American soldiers and Marines, albeit from the shadows and through proxies like Hezbollah or the Asaib Ahl al-Haq. In 2011, when the U.S. government was clearly intent on quitting Iraq, Soleimani wanted to ensure that the Americans' departure was a memorable one.

The key to kicking the Americans on their way out was plausibly deniable violence by proxy. America's experience in Iraq may have chastened it somewhat, but from Soleimani's point of view there was no sense in allowing Iran's most reviled foe a graceful exit. Throughout 2011 the Kataib Hezbollah, the smallest but most deadly of the Qods Force's Iraqi surrogates, staged on American targets a series of attacks that were intended to demoralize and dissuade.[8] Led by Soleimani's friend Abu Mahdi al-Mohandis, the Kataib used a new Iranian weapon with devastating effect. Dubbed by the U.S. military an "improvised rocket-assisted mortar," or IRAM, this weapon was essentially a flying explosively formed

projectile.[9] In June 2011, successive Kataib attacks using IRAMs killed fifteen American soldiers, making that month the deadliest two years for U.S. forces in Iraq. Other attacks followed, including one that inflicted the final American combat fatality, in November 2011.[10]

At the same time that Iranian allies were bloodying U.S. forces leaving Iraq, the Qods Force was conducting an assassination campaign against Iraqi officials deemed hostile to Iran.[11] Together, these attacks on American forces and the murder of Iraqi officials represented a carefully planned and calibrated use of violence on the part of the Qods Force. The objective was a weakened Iraq, wrested from the American grip and dependent on Iran for its security.

AMERICA QUITS IRAQ

The Americans quietly completed their withdrawal before the official deadline to forestall any final spasm of insurgent violence. For his part, Qassem Soleimani could savor his triumph anyway. Iran had come a long way since the United States invaded Iraq and overthrew Saddam in 2003. At that time, Tehran's greatest fear was that the United States might attack it next once the dust had settled in Baghdad. Fast-forward to 2012, though, and U.S. forces had been effectively forced out of Iraq by decisions made by the very government that Washington had struggled so hard to create. In essence, Soleimani had outmaneuvered the Americans in the one area where it counted most: the hallways of executive and legislative power in Baghdad. Soleimani could have been excused for gloating, but if he did he should have known better. Iraq has never, since its creation by the British in the 1920s, been an easy conquest for anybody, least of all its neighbors. The Americans had only just managed to put a lid on Iraq's traumatic sectarian violence when they pulled out. Now Nuri al-Maliki reopened Pandora's Box.

Some press reports suggested that Qods Force advisers, if not Soleimani himself, planted the suggestion in Maliki's mind that his Arab Sunni partners were planning treachery. But Maliki had plenty of reasons of his own to view Iraqi Sunnis with suspicion and distaste. In any case, within hours of the American departure Maliki signed an arrest warrant for the Sunni vice president, Tariq al-Hashimi. Hashimi managed to escape to Iraqi

Kurdistan, but other Arab Sunnis were not so lucky.[12] Within weeks, the tissue of Iraqi unity that had been so painfully woven by American officials was torn to shreds by Maliki's paranoia. Hate and discontent in Sunni cities like Ramadi, Falluja, Tikrit, and Mosul grew as a consequence.

The American departure from Iraq yielded other benefits for Iran. The CIA, for example, issued termination notices to many of its less-important sources, leaving them essentially penniless and terrified. More than a few ex-CIA spies offered their services to Iran's Intelligence Ministry, which learned a great deal about CIA tactics, techniques, and procedures, and in some cases the names of other CIA assets.[13] In this manner Iranian intelligence enhanced its already formidable access to Iraqi politicians, military officers, intelligence bureaucrats, and local leaders throughout the country.

THE ISLAMIC STATE

ISIS was an outgrowth of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). The AQI parent organization gained its own notoriety under Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian terrorist who tried to spark a civil war in Iraq by blowing up Shiite mosques and beheading his captives. Zarqawi's extremism opened the door for the *Sahwa* (Awakening) movement, which drove a wedge between AQI and the Sunni tribes of al-Anbar Province.[14] AQI was systematically uprooted and destroyed by the very people it claimed to defend—the Arab Sunnis of Iraq. Its shattered remnants fled to eastern Syria, where they found refuge among friendly tribes and an Asad regime that regarded them as potentially useful tools against the United States and Iraq. When Syria descended into civil war after 2011, AQI became the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham. Like a mythical monster that can never be killed, ISIS grew strong in Syria by means of weapons seized from Syrian arsenals, extortion, murder, plunder, and a seemingly endless supply of fanatical recruits.

The discontent among Iraqi Sunnis that had been generated by Nuri al-Maliki's sectarian policies gave Islamic State an opening. In 2013, ISIS began making inroads in al-Anbar, infiltrating aggrieved Sunni communities and settling old scores from the *Sahwa* period. In June 2014, the Islamic State seemed to erupt into northern Iraq and global headlines

when its heavily outnumbered forces defeated a feckless Iraqi army and seized the city of Mosul.[15]

Iran's response to the new Iraq crisis was a replay of what it had done for Bashar al-Asad in 2011 and 2012. On 10 June, within hours of Mosul's fall, Qassem Soleimani flew to Baghdad and offered Maliki whatever Iraq needed in terms of arms, money, advisers, and combatants. Perhaps more significantly, Soleimani began dispensing advice on military strategy, leading some outside observers to conclude soon that the Qods Force had taken over much of the Iraqi government's war effort.[16]

Soleimani's immediate concern was protecting Baghdad from another ISIS lightning offensive. In this he was greatly aided by a 13 June fatwa by Grand Ayatollah Sayyid al-Sistani in al-Najaf calling on all Iraqis to join the armed forces and defeat ISIS. Thousands of Iraqi men responded, young and old, flocking to Baghdad to sign up for the newly created Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Forces, or PMF). Led by Hadi al-Ameri and Abu Mahdi al-Mohandis, the new citizens' militia was largely a conglomerate of pro-Iranian private armies already in existence, such as the Badr Organization, Kataib Hezbollah, and Asaib Ahl al-Haq. The PMF was instrumental in defending Baghdad from Islamic State in the summer of 2014. Later it would spearhead the liberation of other Iraqi cities, though often at the expense of sectarian harmony.[17]

What is important for this history is that Qassem Soleimani delivered on the many promises he made to Maliki in June 2014. Qods Force and Lebanese Hezbollah advisers were promptly dispatched to Samarra, Karbala, Tikrit, Irbil, and Baghdad to reinforce the local defenders and inject a much-needed resolve.[18] When ISIS threatened to sack Irbil in August 2014, Soleimani sent in two transport aircraft loaded with weapons, ammunition, and advisers. This raised the morale of the Kurdish Peshmerga fighters at a critical time, when the battle with ISIS could have gone either way.[19] Soleimani also played a hands-on role in the relief of Samarra, a Sunnimajority city that contained an important Shia shrine. When ISIS occupied the city's suburbs and briefly threatened the al-Askari shrine (whose dome had been blown up by AQI back in 2004), Soleimani personally intervened to organize its wavering defenses. He slept in the basement and joined communal prayers while organizing the counterattacks that ultimately dislodged ISIS from the city.[20]

In addition to embedding combat advisers from his Qods Force and Hezbollah, Soleimani informed the Iraqis that Revolutionary Guards battalions in Iran were poised to intervene in Karbala and al-Najaf if either city was threatened. Elements of these regular IRGC units, each reinforced by a commando unit, were later reported fighting in Iraq's Diyala Province to open a supply route to Baghdad from western Iran.[21]

Other vital Qods Force contributions were in intelligence and logistics. Shortly after the fall of Mosul, Qods Force reconnaissance drones began operating out of the al-Rashid air base near Baghdad.[22] Around the same time, the Iranians also established at al-Rashid a signals-intelligence center that intercepted and analyzed ISIS communications. Iran shared both drone imagery and communications intercepts with its PMF allies.[23] Moreover, according to press reports, Iran was staging two or three Il-76 Candid sorties per day to Baghdad International Airport; each of these aircraft could deliver nearly seventy tons of cargo or 120 soldiers.[24] One Shiite militia commander was effusive in his praise of Iranian aid: "When [Iranian advisers] are there in the field, no one stands in our face and magically everything is available, the ammunition, the [intelligence], the smooth coordination with the military units and other [Shia] factions and the air force backup. Without them every [Shia militia] was working alone and none of them were responding to the Iraqi military commanders. If [the Iranian advisers] are there, all sides are responding without any problems or complaints."[25]

SECTARIAN SPECTER

In the early months of Iraq's war against ISIS, Tehran was ambivalent about publicizing its growing combat role. On the one hand, Iranian Foreign Ministry representatives frequently denied that the Qods Force was even in Iraq, let alone directing some of the fighting there.[26] On the other, the IRGC often trumpeted Soleimani's victories, and the Qods Force commander posted numerous images of himself in Iraq on social media.[27]

Still, behind Soleimani's carefully contrived images of camaraderie, triumphalism, and martyrdom lurked the specter of sectarianism. Indeed, sectarian attitudes shaped much of Qassem Soleimani's approach to the war against ISIS, though he never publicly acknowledged it. The fact was that

Soleimani relied heavily on Iraqi Shiite militias to achieve “his” victories, and most of these militias had an axe to grind against the Sunnis, who formerly oppressed them.[28] There was a resurgence in sectarian violence, and an early instance occurred in the town of Jurf al-Sakher.

A Sunni town in largely Shia Babil Province, Jurf al-Sakher was just forty miles to the southwest of Baghdad. More significantly, the town lay astride the Shiite pilgrimage route to Karbala. During the first ten days of the Islamic month of Muharram each year, the large numbers of Shia pilgrims passing through Jurf al-Sakher would attract the attention of al-Qaeda in Iraq and later ISIS, who sought to kill them. In 2014, Muharram began on 25 October. This made it imperative for Baghdad and its Iranian patron to secure quickly the road to Karbala by defeating the ISIS forces occupying Jurf al-Sakher.[29]

Qassem Soleimani took personal charge of the Jurf al-Sakher operation. The seven-thousand-strong force he cobbled together comprised mainly Iraqi Shiite militiamen, leavened with Qods Force officers and Hezbollah combatants.[30] In the first phase, these forces surrounded the town and cut the support lines connecting ISIS defenders to al-Anbar Province. The attackers then shelled, under the supervision of Iranian artillerists, ISIS positions in Jurf al-Sakher, softening them up for the assault that followed. The Iraqi government declared the town liberated on 26 October—just in time for the first pilgrims to pass through on their way to Karbala.[31]

The liberation of Jurf al-Sakher came at a fearful cost to the town’s mainly Sunni inhabitants. Nearly 70,000 of them were driven out, and an unknown number of boys and young men had either disappeared or been deposited in unmarked mass graves.[32] A *New York Times* correspondent described the town as “a wasteland of demolished homes and flooded or burned fields.”[33] One Iranian Intelligence Ministry cable reported on the Jurf al-Sakher battle and its consequences: “As a result of these operations, the area around Jurf al-Sakher has been cleansed of terrorist agents [meaning, apparently, not just ISIS but the Sunni population itself]. Their families have been driven away, most of their houses have been destroyed by military forces and the rest will be destroyed. In some places, the palm orchards have been uprooted to be burned to prevent the terrorists from taking shelter among the trees. The people’s livestock (cows and sheep) have been scattered and are grazing without their owners.”[34]

Other Intelligence Ministry reports less approvingly linked Iraq's revived sectarian violence to the Qods Force in general and Qassem Soleimani in particular. Some criticized Soleimani as a relentless self-promoter, and others warned that Iraqi sectarianism could open the door for a new U.S. military role in Iraq. One intelligence officer implored, "It is mandatory and necessary to put some limits and borders on the violence being inflicted against innocent Sunni people in Iraq and the things that Mr. Suleimani is doing. Otherwise, the violence between Shia and Sunni will continue. At the moment, whatever happens to Sunnis, directly or indirectly, is seen as having been done by Iran even when Iran has nothing to do with it."[35]

THE SIEGE OF AMERLI

One challenge confronting Qassem Soleimani in Iraq was somehow coordinating operations with the Americans. Neither the Qods Force nor its PMF allies could ignore the U.S. military, since it contributed the close air support both desperately needed. As a consequence he obliged the Iraqi government to serve as the primary intermediary between the Qods Force and the Americans. This was a role that Baghdad neither sought nor performed particularly well.

Soleimani's strengths as soldier and politician came to the fore during the Amerli operation in August and September 2014. Amerli is a town in northern Iraq with a Turkmen Shia majority. Its significance for the antiISIS coalition was its location on the road linking Baghdad and the oil-rich city of Kirkuk.[36] To break the Islamic State's siege of the town Soleimani turned to the Kataib Hezbollah militia, equipped it with machine guns, mortars, and rockets. This unit blasted its way through the ISIS siege, entered the town, and remained to bolster the defenses.[37] One Kataib fighter later praised Iran for its support during an interview with a British journalist: "We were besieged for 70 days until we taught [Islamic State] a lesson they will never forget. The missiles we were shooting were Iranian, the ammunition, every bullet was Iranian, everything we used was Iranian."[38]

It was American air strikes that broke the ISIS siege, but Soleimani and the Kataib claimed victory by marching into the beleaguered town. Journalists filmed the Qods Force commander dancing a victory jig with a

Kalashnikov in each hand.[39] Gen. John R. Allen, President Barack Obama's envoy for the coalition against ISIS, chided the media for putting the spotlight on Soleimani: "Do not give them undue credit. Taking a few snapshots of soldiers on the frontline does not mean you are running the war."[40] Perhaps, but Soleimani did seem to be winning the information war.

THE LIBERATION OF MOSUL

Iraq's third-largest city when it fell to ISIS, Mosul was still in terrorist hands three years later. The Iraqi government and its allies focused on liberating Mosul, but first they had to defeat Islamic State forces occupying the key roads leading to it. The forces that massed in early 2017 to oust ISIS from Mosul reflected Iraq's tortured political divisions, both domestic and between its two allies, the United States and Iran, who viewed each other with considerable suspicion. In addition to regular Iraqi army units there were competing Kurdish Peshmerga fighters (as described below) and the various militias that collectively formed the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). There were Iranian Revolutionary Guards in unknown numbers (one report estimated five hundred), who provided advisory support, directed artillery fire, and helped the Iraqis employ Su-25 Frogfoot closeair-support jets.[41] Qassem Soleimani later praised the Iranian Defense Ministry for "working around the clock" to get arms, ammunition, and other equipment to frontline units in Iraq.[42]

The Americans had embedded advisers of their own in the Iraqi army, who provided intelligence, planned operations, managed logistics, and helped coordinate air strikes from U.S. Air Force, Navy, and Marine fighters in the skies above Mosul. Even as the final touches were being made to the Mosul liberation plan, American officials expressed growing concern about the PMF's sectarianism and the outsized role being played by the Qods Force. It was poor policy, the Americans cautioned, to have a Shia-dominated pro-Iranian militia invade a largely Sunni city.[43]

The PMF pushed back against American criticism. The militia's spokesman, Ahmad al-Assadi, had only praise for Qassem Soleimani: "The presence of Brigadier-General Soleimani in the operations to free Mosul and Nineveh Province is necessary and General Soleimani is the greatest advisor that has helped the Iraqi government in the war against [ISIS]. Hajj

Qassem Soleimani is one of the most important military advisors of the Islamic Republic of Iran who is in Iraq at the invitation, demand and agreement of the Iraqi government."[44]

THE KURDISTAN REFERENDUM

When Great Britain created Iraq after World War I, it was already clear that the Kurds were going to be an awkward fit, since they weren't Arab at the time and Arab nationalism dominated Iraqi politics. At times, different Iraqi governments tried to "Arabize" their Kurds, but with little or no success. But it was never as simple as Iraq's Kurds versus Iraq's Arabs. The Kurds were notoriously fractious, and by the time America invaded Iraq in 2003 there were two major Kurdish parties: the Kurdistan Democratic Party, led by Masoud Barzani, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, run by Jalal Talabani. After Saddam Hussein's ouster, Barzani became the president of the autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government; Talabani assumed the largely ceremonial presidency of Iraqi. When Islamic State seized control of much of northern Iraq in 2014, the Kurds took advantage of the chaos to seize the oil-rich and ethnically mixed city of Kirkuk. Later, the Peshmerga also helped liberate Tikrit and Mosul from ISIS.[45]

As far as Tehran was concerned, the situation in Iraqi Kurdistan could be managed as long as the Kurds observed certain red lines. One of these was refraining from any declaration of independence from Iraq. The second was limiting contact with Iranian Kurds, especially those bearing arms against Tehran like the Kurdistan Free Life Party (known by its Kurdish acronym PJAK). But many Iraqi Kurds desired independence, despite—or because of—overwhelming opposition from Baghdad, Tehran, Ankara, and Washington. Originally, the KRG wanted to hold a referendum in 2014, but the unexpected ISIS invasion put those plans on hold. By spring 2017 the situation in northern Iraq was relatively stable, and the KRG proceeded with the referendum.[46]

As Tehran's designated point man for all things Iraqi, Qassem Soleimani flew into Iraqi Kurdistan in early April. His mission was to convince the Kurds to drop the referendum, broker a new modus vivendi with Baghdad, and solve the thorny status of Kirkuk.[47] According to one anonymous Kurdish press source, the Qods Force leader "spoke in a language of threats

and saber-rattling, menacing the Kurdistan region."[48] But most KRG officials were acutely aware of Soleimani's status and understood the fear that Iran could instill in the Kurdish region of Iraq.

Neither Soleimani's pressure tactics nor Baghdad's warnings dissuaded Iraqi Kurds from holding their referendum, and, to make things worse from the Iraqi government's perspective, Kirkuk was included in the vote as if it were a constituent part of the KRG. The referendum was held on 25 September 2017, and 93 percent of those who voted opted to quit Iraq.[49] Many countries criticized the Kurds for their defiance; nevertheless, the vote was a damning indictment of nearly a century of Iraqi misrule.

The Iranians responded immediately. First, they dismissed its results. Second, they closed all border crossings into the KRG's territory, hurting the local economy, which relied heavily on cross-border trade. Third, Qassem Soleimani was sent to Soleimaniya (the PUK capital) and Irbil (the KDP capital) to threaten the Kurds of both stripes if independence was officially declared and the Peshmerga not withdrawn from Kirkuk. On 15 October, pro-Iranian militias and the Iraqi army entered Kirkuk almost unopposed, with the complicity of the PUK, which had withdrawn its Peshmerga from the city hours before.[50] Once again, Kurdish disunity had been exploited by outside forces (in this case Iran) to the detriment of the Kurdish people as a whole. It was the old story.

Iran's response to the Kurdistan referendum of 2017 was an overt demonstration of the Qods Force's power and influence. As usual, Tehran tried to justify its power play by invoking an improbable Israeli bogey. According to Ali Akbar Velayati, the Supreme Leader's foreign-policy adviser, "[Masoud] Barzani's aim and Israel's covert aim were to seize Kirkuk's oilfields to serve the Israeli interest. In the Kurdistan region, they raise the flag of Israel and this means if Kurds gain independence in Iraq, we will share a border with Israel."[51]

RACE FOR THE BORDERS

The liberation of Mosul meant the anti-ISIS coalition could now roll up the remnants of Islamic State's caliphate in eastern Syria and western Iraq. In fact, several parts of the Iraq-Syria border were already in the hands of various militias, many of which were beholden to Iran. In addition, as the

ISIS threat receded the Qods Force renewed its focus on eliminating the U.S. military presence in Iraq. As a result, there was a noticeable spike in U.S. intelligence reports of Qods Force and militia plans to attack the American embassy in Baghdad, the consulate in Basra, and U.S. military facilities in Iraq. Such threat reports prompted the CIA director, Mike Pompeo, to send a written warning to Qassem Soleimani: “What we were talking about in this letter is that we will hold Iran responsible for any attack on U.S. interests in Iraq by forces under Iranian control.” Soleimani sent Pompeo’s message back: “I will not accept your letter nor will I read it. I have nothing to say to these people.”[52]

On the Syrian side of the border, U.S. and allied forces were trying not only to defeat Islamic State but also to prevent the Iranians from completing their overland route to the Mediterranean. In 2016, special forces units belonging to the United States and its allies seized the town of al-Tanf, near the Syrian border with Iraq. Al-Tanf was on one of the roads linking Iraq’s al-Anbar Province to Damascus, making it strategic real estate for both Washington and Tehran.[53] The Iranian government repeatedly demanded that Washington abandon al-Tanf. At the time of this writing, al-Tanf remains in American hands.

MORE IRAQI ELECTION SURPRISES

By 2018, the Iranian government and its de facto viceroy Qassem Soleimani had successfully navigated several Iraqi national elections. Each time the Iraqi electorate had produced a surprise or two, and the May 2018 poll was no different. This time the surprise involved the would-be Iraqi ayatollah, Moqtada al-Sadr. In the lead-up to the vote, Sadr created an improbable coalition of orthodox Shia, ex-Iraqi communists, and Arab Sunni businessmen. Their platform focused on three issues dear to the hearts of many Iraqis: combating official corruption, ending sectarian quotas in federal ministries, and promoting technocrats to lead many of those ministries. At some of Sadr’s campaign rallies there were denunciations of Iran.[54]

As usual no party won a majority of the 329 seats in the legislature, although Sadr achieved a plurality of 54. This meant multiparty coalitions, and it was in this particular arena that Iranian money and influence often

proved decisive. Of course, Soleimani was in Baghdad to influence the process of creating a new pro-Iranian Iraqi government. At first he tried to forge an all-Shia coalition that would include the Dawa, the Islamic Supreme Council, the Badr Organization, and the Sadrists, but the latter chose to resist Iranian blandishments for a while. Next, Soleimani negotiated with the two dominant Kurdish parties, if only to keep them out of a U.S.-backed rival coalition.[55] The bargaining and gamesmanship took nearly five months, and it wasn't until October 2018 that a new prime minister, Adil Abdul-Mahdi, could put together a ruling bloc acceptable to both Washington and Tehran. Meanwhile, Soleimani's Qods Force lieutenants tried to pressure Iraqi politicians further by inciting anti-U.S. demonstrations in Basra and Baghdad.[56]

Soleimani's relentless self-promotion, the incessant drumbeat of pro-Iran propaganda, and the arrogance of Iranian officials grated on the nerves of many Iraqis. In September 2018, a large group of protesters demanding a war on corruption, better government services, and an end to Iranian influence in Iraqi politics torched Tehran's consulate in the largely Shia city of Basra. An enormous Iranian flag flew above this consulate, an undeniable provocation for many in the city.[57] Soleimani was either deaf to the protests or determined to press on with Iran's interests in the face of Iraqi resistance. In any case, when Mahdi's fragile coalition seemed about to break up in the face of unrest, Soleimani flew into Baghdad for a series of meetings with wayward Iraqi politicians. It was exactly the kind of backroom influence peddling that irritated so many Iraqi nationalists.[58]

During the summer and fall of 2019 Iran and the United States had renewed their danse macabre. It was now publicly known, for example, that the Qods Force had transferred new rockets to the Kataib Hezbollah and that some of them were used against American diplomatic and military facilities in Iraq.[59] On 27 December 2019, an American contractor was killed in a rocket strike on an air base near Kirkuk. Two days later, U.S. strike fighters hit targets linked to the Kataib Hezbollah. This, in turn, generated the assault on the American embassy in Baghdad on the night of 31 December 2019. The culmination of this escalating violence was marked by the deaths of both Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Mohandis on 3 January 2020.

IRAN IN IRAQ AFTER SOLEIMANI

Although this book is by no means an exhaustive survey of Iraqi history and affairs, it does highlight one persistent theme in that country's history: Iraq is notoriously difficult to occupy, let alone control. It is true that Iran will be a permanent neighbor of Iraq, but this does not mean that Iran is destined to dominate its neighbor. Iran has little to offer Iraq politically other than an authoritarian ideology that attracts few adherents among Iraqi Shia. Moreover, while Qassem Soleimani's explicitly sectarian agenda served Tehran's goal of a weakened Iraq, that sectarianism could yet boomerang against Iran, especially if Iraqi resentment of Iranian meddling grows. Finally, Tehran has discovered that maintaining a Middle East empire is expensive—in terms not only of human lives but also the treasure necessary to preserve Bashar al-Asad's genocidal regime in Damascus and fragile ruling coalitions in Baghdad.

When Ismail Qaani succeeded Soleimani, his challenges were daunting. The simple fact is that no one could have filled Soleimani's shoes. He had been more than just another representative of Iranian power in Baghdad. He had an ability to both intimidate and inspire loyalty among Iraqi politicians and military leaders. Soleimani knew virtually all of the Iraqi players, some of them back to the 1980s. Finally, as we have seen, Soleimani had a unique ability to play multiple roles and often at the same time. He could be a diplomat and viceroy and was above all a tactician and strategist of unconventional warfare.

Still, Ismail Qaani did inherit some institutional advantages. His greatest asset was intelligence derived from multiple Iranian agencies. As the leaked Iranian intelligence reports revealed, Iran was wired into Iraqi politics, from the federal level in Baghdad down to the provinces and even municipalities. No one understood the religious politics of al-Najaf better than Iran. In addition to these invaluable intelligence resources, Ismail Qaani could rely on a deep bench of experienced Qods Force professionals steeped in the history, cultures, and politics of Iraq. Lastly, Qaani commanded the Shiite militias. Although it would be a stretch to compare them to Lebanese Hezbollah, they did give the Qods Force street muscle and a counterbalance to the Iraqi army.

But the last word on Iran in Iraq may belong to the U.S. Army. Its official history of the 2003–11 Iraq war concludes that “an emboldened and expansionist Iran appears to be the only victor” in Iraq’s interminable crises and civil wars.[60] Qassem Soleimani would have agreed.

Conclusion

This book has examined how the Islamic Republic of Iran uses the Qods Force to achieve one of its most cherished and long-sought-after objectives —hegemony over the Middle East and a seat among the great powers of the world. It demonstrates how Iran has pursued its hegemonic project even though it lacks such commonly accepted attributes of national power as a strong, diversified economy; a modernized, power-projection military; and allies to counterbalance the strength of its many adversaries. In fact, Iran represents the antithesis of these attributes: its economy is a shambles of corruption and mismanagement, its military continues to depend heavily on antiquated weaponry, and its coercive diplomacy has contributed to its own international isolation and growth in the number of its adversaries. Yet despite its many glaring weaknesses, not to mention the suspicion its policies engender among states near and far, Iran was by 2021 closer to regional leadership than at any time in the last three hundred years.

How do we explain this paradox of a state fighting in a league that greatly outclasses its modest capabilities? There are two broad answers: first, the 2003 American-led invasion of Iraq; and second, Iran's increasingly sophisticated use of covert action as an essential instrument of state policy. The 2003 invasion of Iraq upended the fractious geopolitics of the Middle East, but not in the manner that Washington intended. In fact, the only real beneficiary of Saddam's fall was Iran. The final irony is that Tehran—not Washington—now uses Iraq as a base from which to reorder the Middle East. But the U.S. misadventure in Iraq alone does not explain Iran's relative success in exerting regional influence. This is where covert action comes in.

COVERT ACTION AS STRATEGY

It is one thing to have expansive ambitions but another actually to develop a realistic, integrated, and cohesive strategy to accomplish them. Iran has long fantasized about achieving regional hegemony, but it lacks many of the requisites to do so. Moreover, Iran has very few friends but plenty of powerful adversaries—from the superpower, the United States, to such major regional powers as Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. Therefore, Iran cannot achieve regional hegemony via conventional military power or coalition diplomacy. But covert action has provided some means, especially in the arena of proxy wars, terrorism, and psychological warfare.

This book has shown how Iran utilizes each of these covert-action tools to leverage influence and deter the United States and Israel from attacking it. Iran's plausibly deniable use of proxies like Hezbollah has pinned down Israeli military power in Lebanon while convincing the Americans that any strikes against Iran (whether preemptive or retaliatory) carry the risk of Iranian-sponsored terrorism as a response. The United States has never used conventional military force against the Iranian homeland, even in the face of Iranian provocations ranging from the 1979 seizure of the American embassy in Tehran and the Hezbollah-directed truck bombings of the American embassy and Marine barracks in Beirut to the Khobar Towers and to the explosively formed penetrator campaign in Iraq.

FIGHTING IN THE GRAY ZONE

Iran has become a master at fighting its adversaries in what Melissa Dalton of the Center for Strategic and International Studies calls the "gray zone" between conventional war and peace.[1] On one level, Iran can ill afford to fight wars against adversaries equipped with superior weapons and resources. On another, Iran's expansionist objectives mean that it cannot coexist with the international system as it is currently constituted. To bridge the gap between these two seemingly irreconcilable realities, Iran has had to rely heavily on war by proxy, where plausible deniability ensures a reasonable degree of safety from conventional military retaliation—a delicate balance, now and in the future. The amazing thing is that Iran has been able to carry on this campaign for as long as it has.

Unconventional warfare, with its interconnected subsidiaries of proxy wars, psychological warfare, insurgencies, and terrorism, represents an ideal strategy for Iran's rulers. So far, it has enabled the expansion of Iranian regional power and influence and yet limited the possibility of military escalation with either its neighbors or such powers as the United States, France, and the United Kingdom.

If we view Iranian unconventional warfare through the prism of Tehran's national objectives (regime survival, regional hegemony, national territorial integrity), we can better understand why and how its uses of terrorism are selected and calibrated. In other words, with the 2011 plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in Washington, DC, as a notable exception, Iran does not employ terrorist proxies indiscriminately or wantonly but in response to assessed threats (deployed U.S. forces in Iraq, for example) and taking account of the risks of blowback. As this book reveals, Iran's use of proxy violence has been relatively cost-free, even when we factor in the 2020 death of Qassem Soleimani on Iraqi soil.

Iran appears to observe certain "red lines" when it employs terrorist proxies against the United States. In most cases (the 1983 Beirut embassy bombing is one exception) Iran has targeted U.S. military facilities and personnel instead of civilians. This was certainly the case for the Marines in Beirut (1983), the U.S Air Force in Khobar Towers (1996), and the U.S. military in general during the EFP campaign in Iraq (2005–11). When Washington did retaliate, such as by Joint Special Operations Command raids in Iraq or the assassination of Soleimani, the Iranian response has been temporary retreat, reappraisal, and then retaliatory attack on American or British military targets. Such was the case with the missile barrage on a U.S. military base in Iraq after Soleimani's death.

In short, the Iranian government and its Qods Force instrument apparently believe that proxy terrorist violence against American civilian targets is too risky, that it would almost certainly bring escalation. The only exception to this rule of thumb in recent years was the planning phase of the 2011 assassination attempt, when the Qods Force was willing to sponsor the hit even though many American civilians might be killed as "collateral damage." Was this latter case an exception that proved the general rule that Iran uses proxy violence only against American military targets?

Unfortunately, we don't know enough about decision-making in Tehran to make a definitive answer.

The Qods Force and Hezbollah have been far less reluctant to employ terrorism against Israeli or Jewish civilian targets, in cases from the bombings in Argentina and Hamas terrorism campaigns to murders of Israeli tourists in Bulgaria in 2012. This fact no doubt constrains Israeli conventional military retaliation against Iran proper or even Hezbollah in Lebanon. Significantly, in none of the three cases we have outlined did Israel escalate with conventional military force against Iran or Hezbollah. Apparently, the Qods Force and Hezbollah have learned that Israel can be deterred with the right mixture of plausibly deniable violence, rockets and missiles, and psychological warfare.

But terrorism is only one aspect (albeit an important one) of the problems posed by the Qods Force and unconventional-warfare strategy. Iran's strangleholds over Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and, to a lesser extent, Yemen have been purchased with Qods Force "crypto-diplomacy" (i.e., diplomacy outside foreign-ministry channels**)**, copious weaponry for proxies and allies, the long-term building up of intelligence networks and militias, and cold, hard cash. In the case of Syria, when Bashar al-Asad's regime seemed on the verge of collapse, Iran was first on the scene with credit lines, weapons shipments, intelligence, advisers, combat troops, and foreign militias. In Iraq, Qods Force officers often present themselves as diplomats or businessmen and use coercion and money to forge ruling coalitions favorable to Iranian interests. At the same time, the Qods Force arms and trains menacing militias, such as Kataib Hezbollah, whose very existence keeps wayward Iraqi politicians in line.

THE CHALLENGE

One theme pervades this book from its discussion of the creation of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the present: the repeated attempts by American policy makers to find an answer to Iran's unconventional-warfare strategy. One of their major considerations has been finding definitive proof of Iranian responsibility for violence committed by what were clearly Iraniansponsored proxies. In the case of Khobar Towers in 1996, President Bill Clinton rejected military retaliation on the grounds of insufficient

intelligence. This sounds reasonable enough from the vantage points of morality and prudence; however, when the proof did become available in 1999 that Iran had in fact instigated the bombing, the White House still decided against retaliation. The justification given was the 1997 election of an Iranian moderate as president, but it is clear that President Clinton was under no public pressure to act. Three years is an eternity in American politics, and by 1999 public anger and outrage had largely dissipated. From the Iranian perspective, though, the failure of the United States to respond was a sign of either weakness or a cynical unconcern for the deaths of nineteen American servicemen and women.

During the EFP campaign against the coalition in Iraq, American officials debated the response. Some publicly questioned whether the Iranian Supreme Leader knew about and condoned the Qods Force program. Others argued that it was unclear whether Iran had, in effect, declared war on the United States by training Iraqi militants in EFP use. These are obviously serious questions of war and peace, but failure to respond did not constitute an effective policy response. It was not until late in 2006 that U.S. Special Operations units went after the Iranian proxy-support infrastructure, and even then the response was limited to Iraq. For the Qods Force this was yet another signal that killing American soldiers and Marines *might* trigger a U.S. military response, but only in Iraq. The United States had the geocoordinates of more than one Qods Force terrorist training base but never hit one in retaliation.

How then can America fight Iran's plausibly deniable, covert-action strategy? The following represent some of the more promising and less risky approaches to combating an enemy that prefers to fight from the shadows.

INFORMATION WARFARE. All too often Washington did not adequately inform the American public about the Qods Force threat. The main reason for this is secrecy; however, if so much remains classified the inevitable result is an uneducated public. That, in turn, can undermine American policy when action must be taken against Iran because of its attacks against the United States or its allies.

More material on the Qods Force needs to be declassified by the United States and by allied governments. The American public should not have to resort to periodic U.S. Treasury Department announcements or

oneparagraph blurbs in the State Department's annual Foreign Terrorist Organizations report to learn about Qods Force operations. A white paper on the Qods Force and its role in Iranian foreign policy, produced and released for public distribution by the intelligence community is long past due. Ideally, this white paper should tell us when the Qods Force was created (there is much unnecessarily contradictory data on that point), its missions and current structure, and biographical details of its more prominent personalities. Accounts of examples of Qods Force activities in the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and Central Asia would be helpful as well.

The more people understand what the Qods Force is and how it works, the harder it will be for Iran to hide behind the fig leaf of plausible deniability. Like al-Qaeda, the Qods Force should be dragged into broad daylight so that interested American citizens can understand how an Iranian government entity has straddled the gray line between war and peace even as it killed hundreds of Americans over the last three decades. If and when the U.S. government retaliates against targets on Iranian soil for Qods Force–backed proxy wars, there would be more members of the general public who understand *why* Washington has chosen to do so.

POLICY AND DIPLOMACY. Throughout the Cold War there was a broad bipartisan consensus in Washington on policy toward the Soviet Union, its satellites, and the People's Republic of China. That consensus broke down in the 1990s, when the foreign-policy establishment quarreled openly over "peace dividends," "emerging threats," and "new world orders." This was probably inevitable, and debate in Washington over national goals and means was certainly much needed. But that was thirty years ago, and since then we have witnessed the dramatic rise of China as a military and economic superpower, renewed belligerency from Russia, and the continued hostility of Iran and North Korea. All these pressing foreign challenges demand not only coherent policies but, if they are to be credible, the bipartisan backing of those policies in Congress.

The Iran issue reveals how the lack of bipartisan consensus affects American foreign policy. Iran should be a relatively easy country about which to rally bipartisan feelings, since it supplies a steady diet of anti-American vitriol and perpetrates such outrageous acts as planning to use a Mexican drug cartel to kill another country's ambassador in the American

capital. Yet U.S. policy toward Iran has oscillated, from that of Barack Obama, who concluded a multilateral agreement to restrain Iran's nuclear ambitions, to that of Donald Trump, who pulled out of the deal with nothing to replace it. It would be most advantageous to American interests and foreign partners were Washington not only to achieve consensus on Iran but also to publicly and explicitly enunciate just what that policy was. Removing some of the ambiguity that still envelops U.S. policy toward Iran would reduce the miscalculations about intentions that have plagued both Washington and Tehran in the recent past.

Coherent bipartisan policies would also contribute a great deal to American diplomacy with friends and allies. Only the United States has the credibility and the power to create and lead regional coalitions. Regional powers—for instance Israel, Saudi Arabia, or the United Arab Emirates—cannot stand up to Iran on their own. The Qods Force must be confronted by a coalition united by a shared interest in curbing Iranian unconventional warfare. Such a coalition could have its public members (say, the United States, United Kingdom, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates) as well as more discreet ones (perhaps France, Jordan, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia) that for reasons of policy eschew public alignment with Israel or the Americans. Both categories would nonetheless be bound by one essential objective: diminishing Iranian influence in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen by pooling intelligence and together bringing about the defeat of the Qods Force and its proxies.

The informal U.S.-led regional coalition we're speaking of need not rely on kinetic answers to the Iranian threat. Most members would not agree to military solutions anyway, fearing Iranian retaliation. Still, in addition to sharing intelligence about Iran, coalition members could agree on a common approach to the challenge of Qods Force officers posing as diplomats. If enough countries refused to accredit known Qods Force personnel, Tehran would eventually send abroad only professional diplomats.

INTELLIGENCE. "Intelligence failure" has almost become a bromide in Washington, DC, a catchall reason why an otherwise promising policy didn't work. Obviously, the U.S. Intelligence Community can perform better when it comes to Iran, but real change will occur only when managers at individual intelligence agencies are confident that the policy

makers actually intend to confront Iran with all instruments of national power. Surprising things can happen once it becomes clear that Iran is truly a national priority: Farsi language training becomes a requirement rather than an incentive; community-wide access is granted to hard-to-obtain open-source materials; and the study of Iran in all of its facets—culture, history, politics, economics, foreign policy—becomes a passion for analysts and intelligence collectors alike, not just a career technique. The best intelligence officers should be shielded against periodic "body snatching" in their own chains of command when other countries or issues temporarily assume a higher priority than Iran. We can't build a solid cadre of Iran analysts and collectors if we are constantly diverting them.

UNDER-AND OVERESTIMATION. Ultimately, the most fundamental changes have to come in the policy-making arena. As this book has revealed, at numerous moments the United States has declined to respond to Iranian provocations out of a deep-seated fear of the anticipated Iranian response. At times we have set up the Qods Force and its Hezbollah proxy as all-powerful and all-knowing ten-foot-tall villains—which they are not. We do tend to underestimate opponents, but this does not seem to be the case with the Qods Force or Hezbollah.

When contemplating military action against the Qods Force either in Iran or another country, it is always wise to anticipate violent retaliation. Iran has promised as much on numerous occasions. But that prospect should not become an excuse for inaction, because, as this book has shown, Iran's Revolutionary Guards see inaction as weakness and a spur to attack again. In the cases where the United States did push back forcibly against Iran—Task Force 17 in Iraq and the 2020 assassination of Qassem Soleimani—Iran did retaliate, but *it did not escalate*. Iran has good reason not to: Iran has much more to lose from crisis escalation than does the United States. A spiraling series of terrorist attacks against American embassies and military bases will not end well for Iran, and in few places is that better known than in Tehran.

THE OFFENSIVE Iran has been emboldened for some time in its dealings with its neighbors, the West, and the United States in particular, to the point of hubris and arrogance. Iran's attitude stems in large part from the fact that its use of proxy violence has been largely cost-free. When Lebanese Hezbollah blew up the American embassy and the U.S. Marine

Barracks in Beirut in 1983, Washington vowed revenge, but nothing happened. When Qods Force proxies bombed Khobar Towers in 1996, the American president declared that he "would not rest" until the perpetrators had been found and "punished," but nothing happened. When Iran placed EFPs in the hands of Iraqi insurgents and trained them in their use, U.S. policy makers argued over the intelligence as if it were evidence in a court of law. When the United States finally did respond it did so only in Iraq. As far as the Iranian perpetrators and planners were concerned, once again, nothing happened.

We must force Tehran to reassess terrorism as an instrument of state policy. We can do that only if we raise the costs of each case of Iraniansponsored violence. This can be done by going on the offensive—diplomatically, in the information arena, and with the calibrated use of military force.

On the diplomatic front we must carry out a "full-court press" in capitals throughout the Middle East, North Africa, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. That campaign should be reinforced by comprehensive intelligence briefings highlighting in the clearest terms how Iran has used covert action to undermine, destabilize, intimidate, and overthrow regimes throughout the region. Similar briefings should be presented to our NATO allies as well.

We must be far more active in the public-relations arena. The Qods Force needs to be a topic in official speeches and press releases if it is going to have any hold at all on the public imagination. The white paper proposed earlier should be the basis of a continuing dialogue between American officials and audiences foreign as well as domestic. Information is a supremely valuable commodity in modern statecraft. We need to do a better job in getting out our official message on the very tangible links between Iran and international terrorism.

There is room for new military approaches as well. When an Iranian proxy like Lebanese Hezbollah or Kataib Hezbollah attacks military and civilian targets associated with the United States, its allies, or friends and partners, we must make it clear that we will retaliate, without necessarily spelling out how or when, *and then do it*. In most cases, military retaliation should be restricted to the institutions and training camps of the perpetrator. American policy makers, however, must make it patently clear to Tehran that a red line will be crossed *if Iranian state agents or Iranian proxies are*

caught planning or staging attacks on American soil. Crossing that line could bring U.S. conventional military power against Iranian military targets on Iranian soil. Again, Iran will not stop using proxy terrorism as an instrument of policy until the costs become prohibitive.

In a 1987 classified study, the Central Intelligence Agency noted that "Tehran has never been made to pay a significant price for the use of terrorist tactics as a political weapon, a factor that reinforces its willingness to use them."[2] What was true in 1987 is still, unfortunately, true today. We now know far more about Iran than we did then—yet, for the most part, we fail to act on that knowledge.

Glossary

Abuzar	An important companion of the Prophet Mohammed.
Aman	The Israeli Military Intelligence Directorate.
amniyat	Persian for “security.”
ansar	Medina “helpers” who flocked to Prophet Mohammed’s banner.
Ansar al-Islam	“Helpers of Islam.” Kurdish Islamist group active in northern Iraq in early 2000s.
Asaib Ahl al-Haq	“League of the Righteous.” Iraqi political party and insurgent group backed by the Qods Force.
Ashura	The tenth day of the Islamic month of Muharram. Commemorated every year by devout Shia as the anniversary of the death of Hussein, martyred grandson of the Prophet Mohammed.
ayatollah	High clerical rank in Twelver Shiism.
ayatollah al-Uthma	“Grand Ayatollah”—the most senior category of clerics in Twelver Shiism.
Al-Qods	Arabic term for Jerusalem.
Dar al-Harb	“House of War.” In Quranic exegesis, regions that have not submitted to God’s will.

Dar al-Islam	“House of Submission,” often rendered “House of Peace.” In Quranic exegesis, regions that have submitted to God’s will.
dawa	“The Call” in Arabic. Invitation or summons to Islam, also proselytization among non-Muslims.
ettelaat	Persian for “information,” also “intelligence.”
fajr	“Dawn” in Arabic and Persian. Also dawn prayer.
Fatemiyoun	Iran-backed militia in Syria composed of Afghan nationals. Reference to Fatima (daughter of Prophet Mohammed).
Fatima	Daughter of the Prophet Mohammed and mother of several important figures in early Shia Islam.
fatwa	Islamic ruling or judgment, reserved to persons of suitable education and standing.
hajji	Honorific for a male Muslim who has participated in the Grand Pilgrimage to Mecca.
Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba	Movement of the “Party of God’s Nobles.” Pro-Syrian government militia made up of Iraqi Shia.
Hejaz	Region in western Saudi Arabia that includes the two most holy Islamic cities: Mecca and Medina.
hezb	Arabic and Persian for “party.”
Hezb-e Islami	“Party of Islam.” Founded by Afghan Salafists, it became a primary beneficiary of U.S., Saudi, and Pakistani assistance in the 1980s war against the Soviets in Afghanistan.
Hezb-e Wahdat	“Party of Unity.” Afghan Hazara Shia party created in the late 1980s with Iranian support to

	unify the Shia effort against the emerging Sunni Salafist movement in Afghanistan.
Hezbollah	“Party of God.” Quranic allusion used by Ayatollah Khomeini for his most dedicated followers, “Believers in Allah and His Prophet.”
Hezbollah al-Hejaz	“Party of God of the Hejaz.” A banned Iranian-backed Shia political party with a terrorist arm.
Houthis	Members of a Yemen Shia political party named after its founder, Hussein al-Houthi. Also called Ansar Allah.
imam	Prayer leader. Also Imam, any of the first successive leaders (variously identified) of that community after the death of the Prophet Mohammed.
Ismailis	Also “Seveners,” members of a branch of Shiism believing that there have been seven Imams, the seventh being still living, vested in the person of the Agha Khan.
Jaish al-Mahdi	“Army of the Hidden Imam.” Created by the Iraqi cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and associates to combat the U.S.-led coalition and seize power in Iraq.
Jaish al-Shaabi	“Popular Army.” Pro-Syrian government militia.
jamiat	Arabic and Persian for association, society, or group.
Karbala	City in Iraq. Location of shrine to Hussein, the Third Imam in Shiism.
Kataib Hezbollah	“Battalions of the Party of God.” Iraqi Shiite militant organization founded by Abu Mahdi al-

	Mohandis in 2007 with the assistance of the Qods Force.
komiteh	Farsi for “committee.” Neighborhood-level organization of pro-Khomeini young men and women during early days of 1978–79 revolution.
kosar	Persian rendering of Arabic “*al-Kawthar*.” Prophetic reference to a river in Heaven that flows in abundance for all Believers.
Mahdi	“Rightly guided one.” In both Sunni and Shia Islam, a figure whose appearance will signify the advent of judgment day. In Shia Islam, the Twelfth Imam, in hiding since CE 941.
Muharram	First month of the Islamic lunar calendar.
mojahedin	“Soldier of God.”
Mojahedin-e Khalq	“People’s Mojahedin.” Armed Iranian opposition group aided by Saddam Hussein. Active in the United States and Europe under an umbrella group, the National Council of Resistance of Iran.
Mossad	Central Institute for Intelligence and Special Operations. The Israeli national agency, with external responsibilities.
mukhabarat	Arabic for intelligence service.
peshmerga	“Those who seek death.” Kurdish fighters.
Ramazan	Persian rendering of the Islamic fasting month of Ramadan.
Sarollah	Persian rendering of *tharallah*, “Revenge of God.” A title of Imam Hussein, who was martyred at Karbala.
Sepah-e	“Army of Mohammed.” Iranian-backed Afghan

Mohammed	militia.
Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Inqilab-e Islami	“Corps of Guardians of the Islamic Revolution.” In English, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps.
Seyed al-Shohadda	“Master of the Martyrs.” A reference to Imam Hussein.
Seyeda Zeinab	Daughter of Ali and granddaughter of Prophet Mohammed. Revered by Shia and ostensibly buried in Damascus.
Shaaban	Month in Islamic lunar calendar.
Shabiha	“Ghosts.” Pro-Syrian government militia.
sharia	Islamic law.
Shin Bet	Israel Security Agency, with internal jurisdiction. Hebrew abbreviation for “Security Service.”
Shrine cities	Cities where are buried the eleven martyred Shia Imams: Medina, Samarra, Kadimiya, Karbala, Najaf, and Mashhad.
Tajiks	An ethnic group, speakers of Dari, a Persian dialect, inhabiting parts of Afghanistan and the Republic of Tajikistan. The majority are Sunni Muslims.
takfir	Prominent concept in Salafist interpretations of Islam. The denunciation of non-Salafist Muslims as “false Muslims.”
talib	Religious student. Plural: *taliban*.
turbah	Small piece of clay or soil—often from Karbala, where Imam Hussein is buried—used in the Shia prayer ritual.

vali	Guardian of Khomeini's Islamic state.
Velayat-e Faqih	"Rule of the Jurisprudent." Khomeini's concept of clerical governance.
Zeinabiyoun	Reference to Zeinab (granddaughter of Prophet Mohammed). Iranian-backed militia in Syria composed of Pakistani Shia.
zurkhaneh	"House of strength." A traditional gymnasium but with Iranian characteristics, such as weight lifting and religious teaching.

Notes

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